JB TREPAGNIER

CHASING TAIL

FAIRY TALES THAT BITE BACK

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Epilogue

A sad little mermaid trades her voice for legs to get a stupid human prince to fall in love with her—what a crock.

That wasn't how my story went at all. That's not even how mermaids work. We can have legs whenever we want them. We just mostly choose not to because we dislike people who live on land. I would never have set foot there, but I needed to kill a druid king. Yeah, the little mermaid didn't come on land to fall in love with a prince. She went there to kill a king. There are rules. Certain waters are off-limits for the land dwellers. He came to my home on a large ship and killed several of my friends. The sea council might want to let that slide, but he killed my sister, so now I have to end him.

Getting close enough to the king to kill him is going to be complicated. He has three sons that could be my answer to living through this. They aren't bad for druid royalty. Two of them are kind and gentle. The other is a little mean in a way I can appreciate. Still, I don't trust any druid. Out of all the supernatural creatures on land, they are the worst. So much of their magic requires bits from living beings, and their ethics of getting those aren't exactly sound.

I might like his sons, but this can't go anywhere. Most people tend to balk at relationships when you kill their father. I won't stop until it's done. I owe it to my sister.

CHAPTER 1

I gazed out into the utter blackness of the ocean and waited for the lunar eclipse to end. The sea wasn't like land, where they built bonfires and celebrated the eclipse. Total darkness was when the nasty things from the depth of the sea came out to hunt. My people were fierce warriors, but we knew when not to fight. Those things lived in utter blackness. Their home was where not even the mermaids would explore.

I'd gone to the very edge of their domain, but never in it. I should have been home with my family, but my hunt took longer than I expected. I was taking shelter in one of the many ships that littered the ocean floor. For a time, the mermaids and sirens sank plenty of them until an agreement was made with the land people to keep their filthy boats out of this area of the ocean.

The sea was plenty big enough that they could do their exploring and fishing without disturbing us or ensnaring us in their nets. It was bad enough when they took mermaids, sirens, and sea witches from their homes, but they didn't seem to get we had our own world down here. Some of the sea beasts they only wanted for their fins were sacred to us.

My people expected us to look the other way that they were engaging in that in other areas of the sea. Frankly, I thought none of them had tails, tentacles, or the ability to breathe underwater and should just stick to land where they belonged.

Some of the other mermaids were fascinated with the sunken ship graveyard out here. They swam through all the ship skeletons and stole things that were unfamiliar to us here. My younger sister was particularly curious about the land dwellers. I only bothered coming out here because the things we ate were abundant in this area, and it was good hunting.

Seira was always my weakness. My little sister was just such a gentle soul. She was everything I wasn't. I wanted to preserve that and keep that sweetness in her forever. But, it was just so uncommon in the sea folk. Mermaids were territorial and killed anything that came into their homes. Sirens killed people because they liked it. Sea witches were just nasty in general and always trying to rope anyone into deals.

I was okay with her coming to the ship graveyard if I was with her. I'd happily swim the perimeter with my abalone spear while she explored to her heart's content. Then, I'd take her back home with the haul she chose to bring back with her and humor her with conversations about what those things might have been meant for.

I was stuck in one of those ships waiting for the eclipse to pass. We all had pet anemones we used for light. I chose mine personally from an entire field of them after asking its permission to become my companion. They didn't communicate in the same way we did, but they were still intuitive beings. We were safe in this ship, but mine had hidden herself in a box in case anything dangerous swam by.

This wasn't my first eclipse, and every little mermaid had been trained on what to do if you hadn't made it home before it started. Seira and my parents knew damned well I could handle myself just fine, but I was still going to be due this massive lecture when I got home.

The big nasties that could see in the dark retreated back there before the eclipse was over, and the fight started to get fair again. This wasn't just drilled into me since I was a little mermaid. I'd been caught out in a lunar eclipse before. They always came out of hiding, but the eclipse never lasted long enough for them to catch what they truly wanted.

It was already ending. There was a stunning coral reef out here surrounded by ships and the skeletons of men who drowned trying to hunt in my home. I thought it was way more beautiful than anything found in those ships. I always found it beautiful when the moon shone through the water and made it glitter.

It was no different now because it meant I could finally leave this stupid ship. I had a bag full of Seira's favorite spiny lobster and the best seaweed in this area. Her birthday was tomorrow, and I wanted her to have the best meal possible.

As soon as the moon was back, my anemone came out of her box and started glowing. I swished my tail and propelled myself out of the hole in the bottom of this ship. I was in a good mood. Seira's birthday was going to be special. I didn't just find her favorite food. I visited one of the sirens who made beautiful jewelry from coral and treasure from sunken ships. Seira would love it.

A lot of sirens loved to make trinkets and pretty things. They'd always trade for them if you had something they wanted. I visited that particular siren not just because her jewelry was beautiful but because she was one of the few sirens that didn't make their trinkets from the bones of men they had killed. I would have worn it, but it so wasn't my little sister.

Something was wrong. I could feel it the closer I got to home. It was like this irritating feeling of barnacles scratching against my back. I'd never felt this before, but I'd heard about it. Someone *dared* bring a ship into our home. I propelled my tail faster. I needed to call for backup so we could sink it.

This wasn't an accident. Arrangements had been made with every supernatural species on land to avoid this area. Humans were superstitious. There were enough legends among their kind of beautiful women that sunk their ships. They went around this area entirely. Everyone knew better.

The irritating sensation of something scratching my back became almost painful the closer I got to home. There was blood in the water, but the sharks hadn't come. Sharks were highly revered by the merfolk. They didn't attack us, but they always came if there was blood. Blood meant battle and food. The sharks came to protect us if blood was ever spilled. Something was wrong if there was this much blood in the water and not a single shark.

I saw the ship at the surface. What had they done? One of their terrible nets broke the water's surface and unleashed all kinds of horrors into the sea. The corpses of several magnificent sharks started falling to the ocean floor, trailing more blood in their wake. Some of those sharks had been alive a very long time.

They had been mutilated. Their beautiful fins had been cut off, and their bellies sliced open to harvest their organs. This was the first time I'd personally experienced a ship in my home. They made the agreement before I was born. I knew exactly who did this. There was only one race on land who liked to use the parts of living things for magic.

I was about to send a sonic pulse to my parents and every surrounding house we needed to sink a druid ship when I saw the unthinkable. It wasn't just sharks. That was bad enough. There were two arms and a head making their way down to the ocean floor. They had killed one of my people, and if it was done in this area, then I knew them.

There was this horrible feeling in the pit of my gut. This wasn't supposed to happen. Everyone knew better, including the druids. This wouldn't go unpunished. We might even go to land for this.

I stopped dead in the water when I got closer to the mermaid parts falling to the ocean floor. That wasn't some friend. That was Seira. Why had she swum outside during the eclipse? She knew better. I blamed myself for this. I entertained her notions of those ships being interesting. I took her to the ship graveyard when she asked and let her bring things back.

I didn't call for backup to sink the ship. I needed to see the captain of that ship. I wanted to hear them say who sanctioned this because someone would pay for the mutilation of my gentle sister and all those sharks.

That vast net was still dumping horrors into the ocean. I avoided it and swam to the other side of the ship. My head broke the surface, and I just listened.

"Did we get enough?"

"It has to be. We need to get out of here before they realize we are here. We got what we came for. The king wanted this for a reason. Let's get out of here before we all die."

The king of the druids ordered an attack on my home because he wanted parts of sentient beings that lived here? My sister never hurt anyone, and some of those sharks were my friends.

We could sink that ship, but I had this feeling there would be more. No, this required a unique approach. I'd never wanted to before, but mermaids could have legs on land. So could sirens. We just chose not to because why? The ocean was just so much more superior.

This required legs. They thought if they could just get the ship back home, they wouldn't pay for this. They thought they could come into *our* home and kill us without repercussions.

I dipped my head under the water and let out a sonic pulse only the sea folk could hear. Let's see how they liked it when someone invaded their home and started killing. The king was mine.

He killed my sister for her parts. I had just the siren in mind to decorate my room with trinkets made from his bones.

CHAPTER 2

The mermaids, sirens, and sea witches came to my aid to sink the ship when I sent out the sonic pulse, but that was about all they did. That was enough for them. It would never be enough for me. That ship was part of a bigger problem. The druid king deliberately broke our peace to hunt here. They weren't just after sharks, or they wouldn't have mutilated Seira.

She couldn't have brought down their ship alone, nor could she have called for help out of the water. They didn't care about us knowing they had been there, or they wouldn't have filled the water with blood. They could have held her in the boat, sailed to safety, and released her, but I just had this feeling they were hoping to catch one of us.

No one had my back on this. My parents loved my sister just as much as I did, but they didn't want to wage war on the druid king. Everyone seemed content to post sentries and sink any new ships that were sent. That wasn't our way.

Growing up, one of my favorite stories was about this brave mermaid who battled against a sea witch who had gone wrong. The sea witch turned noble sharks and whales into horrific monsters and used them to attack the mermaids. It was a lot like this situation. Everyone was so busy fighting off the sea monsters she was sending, no one was focusing on the source.

She took it upon herself to swim away and escape. Sea witches were cunning and dangerous even when they hadn't gone insane. They lived in caves in the ocean, and they made damned sure no one was getting inside unless they knew about it.

The mermaid watched and waited. She played the long game. She outsmarted the sea witch and killed her. Mermaids and sirens stopped getting slaughtered, and sharks and whales went back to being revered instead of being turned into monstrosities.

I loved that story. I always tried to get Seira more interested in tales of mermaid heroics over those sunken ships, but she had always been a dreamer. Seira was more interested in the unknown, no matter how many times I tried to tell her how dangerous those people were.

I was dangerous too. I paid attention in school. I learned my history, and I learned how to fight. I knew *all* about what went down when they were negotiating keeping boats out of our home. The sea council was usually immensely shrewd. They prepared for this exact scenario and kept the fact that we could have legs and attack them on land a secret. Everything was done from the sea before.

The entire point of having that negotiation in the middle of the ocean was that the council knew that eventually, some idiot would break the arrangement, and they were going to be smart about it. Everything they had taught me about land-dwellers was that they were greedy. I'd seen their ships.

Someone would be willing to risk it for something pretty. The person responsible wouldn't set

foot in my home in a wooden ship we could easily sink. If someone were evil enough to do what I saw, they would have no problem giving someone whatever they desired to get them to take the risk.

I had nothing left to lose. I couldn't protect my sister, but I was absolutely not going to witness another massacre like that again when I could stop it by killing the druid king as messily as possible. Sometimes, an example needed to be made.

The council was against me. My parents were against me. A good bit of the sea folk was. But not everyone. My sister touched a lot of lives. She wasn't on the council, but one of the sea witches thought we should attack them on land. I could use that.

The discussion was getting heated because I wasn't backing down from this. Finally, they had the nerve to dismiss me and tell me to cool off. I kicked up the sand as I swam off in a huff. The sea witch propelled her tentacles and followed me. I had at least one ally here.

Taron had been hiding behind a massive piece of coral. Poor Taron. He was a great white shark around my age. He avoided the net and the slaughter, but he lost people too. But he was a friend, and he always looked out for Seira. Sometimes, he patrolled when we were at the ship graveyard if she was with me, even if there wasn't any blood.

I jerked my head to indicate he should follow me. Talora was still following. Out of all the sea witches in the ocean, Talora was probably the nicest. She made little trinkets from shells that were enchanted to make you look prettier for Seira all the time. I'd never go to a sea witch for anything serious, but I knew Talora really like Seira, and when revenge was involved, you could generally trust them.

I led both of them to the ship graveyard. It seemed appropriate. This was Seira's favorite place, and I came here to hunt often. The younger mermaids like to explore out here, but they eventually grew out of their fascination with all this. The older mermaids considered it cursed and avoided the area. That was partly why all the younger mermaids liked to sneak out here. It wasn't just the unknown. Their parents didn't want them to come.

I knew we'd be alone here. All the adults were currently being idiots and planning on who would lose sleep patrolling for ships instead of going to the source. Their children were all locked safely inside with their dolphin nannies. Ours had retired because Seira was the youngest and old enough to take care of herself now. If Orabel had still been living with us, she would have smacked Seira with her fin as soon as she caught her sneaking out.

And she would have. I tried sneaking out plenty of times, and Orabel always caught me. It hurt like a beast when she wanted to make a point with her fin.

I settled myself on a rock and draped my tail over it. Talora rested on her tentacles. Her neck gills were flaring in anger. Talora's skin was usually this lovely pale green, but it was tinged purple in anger. Taron was also pissed. His second row of teeth was out, and he looked ready to eat someone.

"I know you're going to land, Kishi," Taron said. *"Talora, I know you like to pretend you only make nice magic, but I know you can brew something to make it possible for me to go. We all cared for Seira, but my other friends died, too. Kishi has a better chance of succeeding if she has backup."*

I loved Taron, and Talora had given me no reason to distrust her so far, but sea witches never did anything for free. Sharks were sacred sea beasts. We revered them because they protected us in the water. Unfortunately, they had never been given the ability to walk on land like us. If they were removed from the water long enough, they perished.

I had no doubts a sea witch could brew up something to do just that, but the cost would be high. Talora was motivated because she liked my sister, so I doubted *she* wanted much to do it, but all

magic came with a price. Taron's price might be way too much for the revenge he wanted.

"Taron—" I started.

"Wait," Talora said. *"Before you ask me this, you need to know the cost. It's possible, and it's been done before. It's not a potion or a talisman you can take off. It's permanent. I would have to cut into your tail and insert the magic that way. You could become a land dweller at will, but you could also return to the sea as a shark. But there is a price."*

"Sign me up. That sounds amazing, and I could stop the king of the druids from bringing more boats here."

That was such a shark thing to say. They weren't afraid of anything, and they never did business with sea witches. A shark hunted and killed. I thought they had no reason to ask a sea witch for magic. Clearly, I was wrong if Talora knew precisely how to manage this and said it had been done before. Taron had always been headstrong and fierce. I understood he needed this just as much as I did, but he needed the complete picture of what all this came with.

Talora let out this horrible chuckle. Did all sea witches practice their wicked laughs before they went to sleep at night?

"Never do business with a sea witch without asking the price, young shark. What you are asking isn't natural for sharks. Sea animals who have asked for this magic before do it intending to never return to the sea. I don't know how the ocean will react when you return home. The council doesn't want anyone going on land. You could leave with Kishi. The two of you could kill the druid king and stop the ships.

"The council may forgive Kishi for going against their wishes, but the rest of the ocean may view the magic in you as unnatural. As a result, you might not be welcome anywhere in the ocean. The same goes for Kishi. Seira wasn't the first mermaid obsessed with land dwellers. Likewise, Taron isn't the first shark asking to go to land.

"The council won't talk about it and refuses to teach it, but sometimes, people don't feel at home in the sea. Everyone tries, and no one can make that feeling go away. So they generally slip out in the night and are never heard from again. The council won't help them, but a lot of the sea witches do.

"We understand that sometimes, people are born in a body they aren't meant to be in. Mermaids have options, but other sea animals don't. We help them. That situation is not the two of you. Kishi, you are a proud mermaid who has made it clear you have an immense disdain for anything related to land. Taron, you're only going for revenge.

"I agree with both of you that the druid king needs to be stopped, or more ships will be sent. The mutilation of Seira and the sharks need to be paid in blood by the right person. You both need to be prepared for the fact that the ocean might not welcome you back if you do this."

I squared my shoulders and swished my tail.

"The ocean is a big place. I can make my home anywhere. I'm doing this."

"My family is gone," Taron said. *"They came out when they saw the ship. I barely avoided that net. Kishi is right. If I can't make my home here, we can find a home together somewhere else. We are friends, and we will always be friends. There are worse fates than being banished with Kishi."*

"I've advised you both of the risks. If you are willing to accept the costs, then I will do the magic. Come alone when you come to me. The council will cover it up and make excuses when Kishi disappears. They will post their sentries and act like everything is normal. Everyone will assume Taron left when his family was murdered. I drew attention to myself supporting you and leaving with you when they dismissed you. They will come sniffing around my cave. I know this

needs to happen, even if they don't want me on their precious council, but I'm not getting banished for this. I have my cave just the way I like it."

"How much time do you need?"

"Give me a week. And for Triton's sake, pretend like you are okay with the sentries and not attacking. Don't draw attention to yourself. Do not give anyone the excuse to spy on you and follow you here. They will stop you if they think you are trying to disobey."

I could do that. I knew Taron. He was a hothead, but he was also an excellent warrior. He wouldn't have accepted that particular price unless he knew he could handle it. Talora was right about several things. First, I might not be welcomed home as a hero if I killed the druid king, even if it saved many lives.

I still had to do this, and if I had to get banished with someone, well, Taron wasn't a terrible choice.

CHAPTER 3

I was pretending everything was normal, but I was really so frustrated and disappointed with my people. They were locking their kids up and taking this sentry duty so seriously. Anyone with a brain knew there wouldn't be another ship this soon.

The land dwellers didn't know the first thing about what went on under the sea. They didn't know what came up from the depths during an eclipse. They were counting on us being in total darkness as a means to get away with it. They weren't going to come back when we could see them. The fucking druid king probably hadn't even realized his men were dead.

We made our home far away from land. It took more than a day to sail here. There were plenty of places in this vast ocean for them to drop their filthy nets for fish to feed themselves. Unfortunately, it wasn't just the druids who sought deeper waters for bigger catches. Many savages on land liked to eat parts of sharks. They lit their houses and perfumed their skin with things that were only possible by murdering wise and noble whales.

I had no idea where the druid king actually lived, but I knew if he thought ship would get away with it, he still wasn't expecting them back yet. So, all of this was utterly pointless. Resources weren't unlimited in the ocean either. Building houses took time, and I would imagine ships did too. He wouldn't risk another one of his precious ships when he didn't know if the other one had successfully mutilated several creatures in the ocean.

I didn't want to draw attention to Talora, and I didn't want to be stopped. I'd never been on land before, and all I knew of their customs was what had been taught to me by a really ancient whale professor in school. Whales always tended to be the most intelligent things in the entire ocean, and they lived the longest, but they couldn't exactly go on land or even talk to those people like we could.

I might not have been able to *sneak* out of the house when I was supposed to be inside, but I'd certainly lied my way out several times. Lying came easy to me and was sometimes and necessary evil. These sentries swimming around our home now weren't necessary, but sometimes, they were. They used to like to tell me I was too young for that, and it was too dangerous. I did it anyway, right under their noses.

I could use that because I doubted it would be easy getting close to the druid king. We didn't have kings or queens in my area of the ocean, but some sea folk did. I'd been invited to those kingdoms before and seriously thought councils with a representative from everyone were the way to go until everyone was against me on this.

I'd been invited to those kingdoms, and I barely even swam in the same current as their royalty. They had so many guards surrounding them. I didn't even bother trying. Instead, I ate their food and flirted with the local mermen until it was time to swim back home.

Getting close to the druid king was going to take every skill I had, and there was *a lot* I didn't know about living on land. There was a lot I didn't care about knowing, either. So, I waited and plotted. I couldn't go very deep into my plans because a lot of that was hinging on getting there and not coming off totally bizarre to these people. I didn't need to blow my cover as soon as I got there.

I saw a shark in the distance. I recognized the long scar down his right eye. Taron was lurking and trying to get my attention. I felt okay bringing him with me. He was doing his job, too. He volunteered for sentry duty and put on airs like he wasn't handling the loss well. When Taron disappeared, no one would suspect it was with me. We needed to be planning, but we weren't hanging out, even if we usually did that often.

I grabbed my abalone spear and made like I was going hunting. Taron went the completely opposite way and took the long way to the ship graveyard. There was this cluster there where several ships fell to the ocean floor relatively close together. It provided the perfect cover if you didn't want to be seen. I didn't just come out here to hunt or bring Seira. Rio was a persistent merman who didn't get that I wasn't into him that way. Sometimes, I came here to get away from him. Rio thought this place was haunted and never followed.

I double-checked to make sure I wasn't followed. All the teens were on lockdown. They could attend school, then go back home. No adults came out here except me because I wasn't superstitious, and there were plenty of things to eat out here because no one else was hunting in this area.

"It's done. Talora did the surgery and put the magic in my fin. It hurt like a bitch at first, but she healed it, and it's painless now. We are going to need a damned good plan for sneaking away with all these sentries posted. Talora said it's mostly done at night, but they are out then too now."

"I've thought about this," I said. *"It'll also keep attention away from Talora. They are all on high alert, looking for ships. They know I can handle myself on hunts. So instead of volunteering to be a sentry, I'll say I'm going hunting. They know I swim far sometimes. So we'll swim straight past them and tell them I'm looking for spiny lobster, and you're with me for protection."*

"That'll work. When do we leave?"

"I'd say now, but there are things I need to pack. I've seen Talora too. She gave me an enchanted abalone dagger to kill the druid king with. I'll pack it in my bag with a few other things."

"We're going to do this, Kishi. I don't know the first thing about being on land, but I'll protect you with my life."

I squared my shoulders and brushed my hair out of my eyes.

"The only person dying is the druid king and anyone who gets in our way."

CHAPTER 4

I should have been awake all night. My life was about to change. I was about to go to land for the first time, avenge my sister, and I might not be welcome home when I was done. Instead, I slept like a baby. Everything was coming into place. I was one step closer to killing the druid king. My people might not appreciate it, but I was doing this for them, too.

I woke up refreshed and ready to get started. I ate my favorite breakfast of seaweed and mussels and got started. I knew that the shiny gold pieces on the ships were how humans paid for things. I slipped the enchanted abalone dagger, several gold pieces, and a few jewels into my bag. I grabbed my spear and swum out.

My parents were already gone. They weren't even trying to deal with our grief together. They had thrown themselves into sentry duty and were seldom home anymore. I still owed it to them to tell them the truth. They wouldn't be back until dark, long after I was gone. I scratched a note into a shell and left it on their bed.

No one tried to stop me as I swam through our village. They all knew if I weren't volunteering to stand guard, I'd be out hunting. I was counting on that. Taron was waiting for me, just like we planned. I ran my hand down his rough hide, and we swam away.

We didn't come across any resistance. We passed several sentries, and we were only stopped when we got to the very edge of our home. I explained what I was looking for and that Taron was with me for protection, and they just let me leave. Taron and I didn't look back as we started towards land.

Talora didn't just enchant the dagger to kill the druid king. We didn't know where he lived or where that ship was returning to. Instead, she spelled the knife to find him. I used to make it a point to never deal with sea witches, but Talora proved quite valuable.

It may take a land dweller ages to cross an ocean in their bulky ships because they weren't meant to be in the water. Taron and I were built to use the currents to our advantage. We were sleek and fast underwater. I *was not* looking forwards to being slowed down with pesky legs.

The council opted not to use it, and none of us had tested it, but we learned about legs and the basics of going on land from a mermaid elder. I knew I could manage legs just fine, but I was also sure a lot of what I was taught was horribly outdated.

Taron and I used the dagger to guide our way through the water to the druid king. We avoided other villages, but the closer we got to land, the more the landscape changed. We stopped seeing thriving communities of mermaids and ran across way more sirens.

Mermaids liked to live a symbiotic life. We worked with the sea life. Sea witches and sirens were always welcome because we understood they had their uses. Sirens didn't like that kind of life. There was only one of them back in my village, and that was because her family had banished her.

Sirens technically *could* eat seaweed, fish, and other sea creatures, but it wasn't their preference. They liked the flesh of land dwellers and usually populated areas their prey was likely to go. So Taron and I weren't in danger from sirens. They didn't care about us because we weren't tasty to them. So we passed with little trouble.

We did run into a serious snag. Taron was my age. He was still considered young for a great white shark, but he wasn't remotely small. He was larger than plenty of sharks that were much older than he was, and there was only so far he could swim before the currents would betray him and beach him.

He had magic inside him now, so that wouldn't kill him, but I imagined it would be uncomfortable and put us off the path the knife guided us to. Plus, land-dwellers didn't understand sharks at all. They murdered them on sight and thought they were these vicious killers. They never concluded that the only reason they kept drowning or getting eaten in the water was that people lived here and were invading our home.

"Taron, you have to use the magic and change. I'm strong enough to get us both there."

"Slight problem, Kishi. Talora warned me about this. I can breathe underwater as a shark or on land as a land dweller, but I can't do both. So we're going to have to go off course a bit, so we aren't spotted before we want to be. They will kill me if they see a shark, and they will capture you if they see a mermaid."

"We should really rethink only killing the druid king, Taron."

"Focus, Kishi. If we're going to do this, we're going to do this right. I know you can get me to shore without drowning me if I change, but we have to do this carefully, or we're going to be the ones who end up dead."

"Swim as close as you can get to the surface and change. Then, I'll get you the rest of the way there."

I wasn't sure what I was expecting. Taron didn't get close enough to the surface that his fin broke the water. It was like a current started spinning around him. It shoved me away from him and dragged him further below the water. When I could finally see again, there was a man with legs struggling to swim and breathe.

I swished my tail as fast as I could to get to him. I pressed my mouth against his and helped him breathe as I got us to the surface. When our heads broke the water, I looked around. We were alone. It was dark out, and all the land dwellers were asleep. I could see land and ships in the distance.

"How do I look?" Taron asked.

He could still communicate like we did underwater. He'd never spoken from the surface before. I'd have to teach him.

I took a look at him. He looked good. If he had been a merman, I would have been highly attracted to him. His skin was dark, like mine. My hair was white. Taron's hair was black and wild. He had the same scar over his eye like he did when he was a shark. He was massive under the sea. He was huge as a land dweller.

"If you had a tail, I'd start a campaign to marry you. Not bad."

Taron started to tread water and smirked at me. Damn, he was sexy when he did that. Pity he wasn't a merman.

"Maybe Talora can do that too."

"Hush, Taron. You're very pretty, but you'd never be happy as anything but a shark. So let's get you to land."

"Look east. There's an unoccupied beach out of view from those ships."

"Good call."

I was sleek and fast under the water. I was pretty quick on the surface too. I didn't regret having Taron with me in the slightest. Having a friend from home while I did this meant I wouldn't lose myself on land. He was easy on the eyes if I ignored those legs. Still, trying to pull him to land when he wasn't used to swimming like this was tiring.

Taron had always been brilliant. He was a fast learner and adaptable. I wasn't shocked if anyone had managed to escape those nets, it was going to be him. He started kicking those horrible legs and made this a lot easier for me.

Neither of us managed well when we got to shore. I needed to be out of the water and dry before I had legs. Taron had legs but didn't know how they worked. He was trying to carry me to where it was dry, but we both kept falling into the sand.

Anyone could have seen or heard us, especially since we couldn't stop laughing. Taron found the same thing funny I did. I would be managing my legs just as well as he was. We had these grand plans to kill the druid king. I had a magic dagger, and Taron could now shift his body, but this wasn't going as well as we initially thought.

Legs were utterly ridiculous.

Taron finally managed to get to his feet, though he was a bit unsteady. He picked me up and managed to carry me off the beach and into the trees where we wouldn't be seen. He didn't totally drop me when he set me down.

"This is weird, Kishi. It smells funny out here."

I breathed in. I could smell the salt from the ocean, but it was far away. There were so many other unfamiliar smells bombarding us. They weren't wholly unpleasant, but it was a bit much. It was also much warmer here than the ocean.

"It's not completely ugly, though. Some of those flowers are pretty."

"How do you make your legs come out?"

"Well, I've never done it before, but I think if my tail dries, it just happens. You have them. How do they work?"

"It doesn't require a lot of thinking. It's like swimming. It's instinct. This is just unfamiliar, so I had to get used to it. My balance is off without fins. Do you require anything to get dry?"

"I'm not sure. I've never done it before. I think it just happens after a while when you are out of the water. If what Talora said is true, they deliberately left a lot of information out in case we wanted to run away. If that massacre didn't get them here, I don't know what will."

"Well, we can just sit here and get used to land while you dry. If you would also like to admire me and picture me with a tail, you can do that too."

I shoved his arm. Taron was as hard as a rock. He'd always been a flirt, even as a shark. He flirted with everyone, even if they weren't sharks. A whale once knocked him clear across the ocean because he said something inappropriate about her blowhole. Taron had been a good-looking shark, and he knew that. I probably just made things worse by telling him he was pretty as a land dweller.

"Please don't get a fat head because you happen to be pretty. Let's focus on something else. First, you need to learn to speak."

"I am speaking."

"Like the land dwellers," I said out loud. "They can't hear you when you talk like we are doing."

Taron jumped and looked startled. I'd never seen him jumpy like that before. He seemed to be okay enough with having legs he was showing off and flirting, but I guess speaking was where he drew the line. It was kind of adorable. Taron was here with zero fear, and I knew he would kill anyone who tried to hurt me or stop us from completing what we came here to do. He didn't even

pause when he got to the surface. He immediately asked what he looked like. Speaking is what got him?

"It's okay, Taron. We can't do this underwater because no one would hear us. Mermaids, sirens, and sea witches are taught how to do this when we are out of the water, but most of us don't go out of the water often. It was how they communicated the treaty with the land dwellers. It's still taught just in case it's needed."

Taron produced a sound, but it was more of a grunt. He was definitely pouting over this.

"Try this. Say *hello, my name is Taron."*

Taron figured out swimming and his legs fast enough, but what came out of his mouth wasn't even remotely speech. Instead, it was kind of a grunting wail.

That was when it hit me. Taron didn't need to talk, and I only needed to when it suited me. Taron and I could communicate just fine without anyone knowing. We could use that. It was just the two of us. We weren't getting anywhere near the druid king by force. We'd have to be smart about it.

I grabbed Taron and planted a kiss on his mouth.

"Taron, you're a genius! We can talk without them knowing. If these people think we are mute and can't spill their secrets, they will reveal all kinds of things around us. Like how we get close to the druid king and stick him with this knife."

"What was that?"

Something between Taron's legs was now growing. I had a feeling I knew what it was and what it was for. It went a little different under the sea. I still had my tail and couldn't even remotely move away from him, so I just awkwardly pointed at it.

"That was a kiss, and you'd better get that under control, buddy."

"How? It feels like I need to mate, but there are no female sharks around that are fertile. It's wrong. Why do land-dwellers only have one? I much prefer having two when I'm a shark."

Talora so didn't prepare us for this. I thought land dwellers were horrifically deformed since they had legs instead of tails, but I was still drawn to Taron like this. I wanted to touch him, even if I wasn't sure we'd even be compatible once I was dry and had legs too.

"This is awkward," I said, looking away.

"I have weird, unnatural instincts like this. I'm going to go behind that strange plant while you dry. I want to see something."

Taron ambled off while I was left in the sand to see if what I was taught about getting dry was true. We should definitely forget this ever happened if I got legs.

CHAPTER 5

Taron appeared to be fascinated with whatever he discovered behind that large plant. He kept making strange noises that were oddly titillating. I'd think he was done, but then he would start again.

Drying off was a strange sensation. It was a little uncomfortable. My tail itched like crazy. I kept scratching but never got any relief. I felt sick when my scales tore when I was trying to get some relief. There was no blood. There should be blood. There was finally a break in Taron's strange moans, so I called out to him in a panic.

Taron sounded like he had been enjoying himself. He might be in an entirely new form, but he was still Taron. He came charging through the woods as soon as he heard me and fell to his knees at my side.

"What is it, Kishi?"

"Something is wrong. Look at my tail. Maybe they lied to us, and I'm dying."

Taron's hands fluttered along my tail and checked the long rip. Finally, he sat back on his heels and grinned at me.

"You aren't dying, Kishi. Your legs are under there. You're like a little mermaid oyster. You have to peel that off to get to the legs."

"What if it's permanent? What if I peel my scales off and don't get them back? What if that's the entire reason the council didn't want us coming? Because once you have legs, you don't get a tail anymore!"

I didn't think this through. I needed to do this. *Someone* needed to kill the druid king, but I absolutely didn't want to stop being a mermaid. The sea was in my blood. I was never one of those mermaids who was obsessed with all things land. I wanted to do this and retreat back to the ocean, even if I wasn't welcome back home.

Taron kissed me right on the mouth as I had done to him. He pulled back and tucked my hair behind my ear.

"This isn't permanent. Talora was clear about all the prices we would pay. She would have told you. She laid out every reason for us not to do this. Why would she tell us the magic she gave me was permanent, and both of us might be banished if you couldn't go back to the ocean?"

"Because she's a sea witch, and that's what they do?"

"Just tear it off, Kishi. I'll throw you back in the ocean so you can see you have your tail back, then we can do this whole drying off thing again."

I took a deep breath. Taron was right. Talora had given me no reason to think I couldn't trust her. She had been brutally honest about all costs of what we were going to do. She lived among mermaids.

Talora knew me, and she knew Seira. Banishment should have been enough to get me to drop this if I wasn't totally serious about it. She knew way more about runaway mermaids than I did. She gave us every reason not to do this. If we didn't balk at banishment and permanently changing Taron, she would have brought out me being stuck on land.

"Help me?" I asked.

"Always. That's what I'm here for."

It was pretty disgusting. Taron and I peeled my scales off. It was different when I was doing this to something I intended to eat. There was this nasty feeling in my stomach like my last meal wanted to come up when I was doing it to myself.

When we were done, I had two legs like Taron. I really wanted to use them to make my way back to the ocean to prove to myself this wasn't permanent, but Taron and I really needed to practice using these things. I imagined people were already going to treat us differently for not speaking. Falling all over the place was definitely not going to get us close to the druid king.

Taron helped me to my feet, and this was definitely strange. Taron was wrong. I definitely thought about this. I was weightless in the ocean. I wasn't here. My feet were pressing into the sand. I willed one foot in front of the other and collapsed into Taron's arms. He definitely figured this out much faster than I did, and I prided myself on my grades in school.

I heard voices and laughter from the beach. That had me figuring this out quickly. I ambled over to the tree line and saw a man and a woman. Their bodies were covered in strange things. I remembered them from the paintings in the ships. We didn't bother with that in the ocean. Were they going to find this offensive?

They fell into each other kissing. Then, they stripped off their clothes and ran into the ocean laughing. I placed my finger over my lips and looked at Taron.

"We need to steal those and put them on. I think everyone here wears those."

"Gross," Taron said.

"I know, but I don't think we have a choice."

The couple was splashing and laughing in the ocean. Then, they started making the same moans Taron had been doing. The woman was making noises that almost made me think he was hurting her, but the entire thing made me feel strange, so I doubted it.

Taron and I were both clumsy, but we managed to get out onto the sand and steal from them. We went way further into the woods this time because I imagined they would come looking. Instead, I realized Taron had stolen more than just the skin coverings. There was a basket there.

Taron opened it and pulled out a fish. What the fuck did they do to it? They ruined it. It was totally dried out, and it was way too small to be worth eating. Taron raised it towards his mouth.

"Do not eat that. That's disgusting, Taron."

"What? I'm hungry. It's still fish. We're going to have to eat like they do while we're here. Maybe we can teach them the right way to eat seafood."

Just then, my stomach let out a huge rumble. I was starving. We had been swimming for most of the day and hadn't really stopped to eat. I packed some seaweed for energy, but it was now gone. I couldn't exactly go back in the ocean for proper food because there were people out there, and I'd have to do the whole peeling my scales off again. Taron would have to carry me back into the woods, and it ran the risk of us being seen.

I reached into the basket and pulled out some weird, round white stuff. I sniffed it. It smelled funny, but not in a bad way. I licked it. Not bad. I dug into the basket again, and there was a knife. I sliced off a piece and put it in my mouth. Oh, wow. This was amazing. Whatever this was, it was

probably the only perk to living on land.

"You have to try this, Taron."

Taron spat something out and eyed it like it was evil.

"I don't think these people honor every part of the fish, Kishi. The head is usually my favorite part, but it hurt my teeth. Look at these teeth. I only have one row, and they are totally useless. I can't even crack open skulls with them."

"Ignore that nasty dried fish, Taron. Whatever this white stuff is, I'm going to eat it the entire time we're here."

"The fish isn't half bad if you don't try to eat the bones. It's kind of a waste, though. I'll try that weird looking white stuff if you try the fish."

"That fish looks vile."

"So does that round white stuff."

"Shut your mouth. The white thing is delicious."

"What else is in there?" Taron asked.

Taron dug into the basket. Was everything the land dwellers ate round unless they took it from the sea and ruined it? There were small, round red things and another round thing that was brown and looked a little unappealing. I was almost certain this white stuff was the only good thing these people ate, and I definitely wasn't putting that fish in my mouth.

Taron might be walking around in the body of a man, but he was still a shark, and sharks tended to put anything in their mouths to see if it was tasty. Taron stuck his hand in that gross looking brown thing. Was it some kind of oyster? The brown stuff appeared to be a shell of sorts, and there was something inside it. Still not going in my mouth.

Taron let out this noise that was similar to what he was making when he disappeared behind that plant for what seemed like an eternity.

"You have to try this, Kishi. Ignore the weird fish. I'll try that white stuff you're raving about if you'll try this."

I wasn't convinced, but I really wanted Taron to try this new food I liked. So I stuck my finger in the thing. It was a little warm and felt weirder than any oyster I'd ever opened. I really didn't want to, but I licked my finger.

Something sweet and wholly strange exploded on my tongue. This was actually delicious. I didn't know what kind of oyster it was, why its shell was that soft, or why it tasted sweet, but it was definitely delicious.

"That's the best oyster I've ever eaten," I moaned.

"I don't think it's an oyster, Kishi. I have no idea what it is, but if it were an oyster, they would have done something weird to it like the fish."

"Well, we have to figure out what this and the white stuff is to point at it, so we don't have to eat their terrible version of seafood."

"Oh, wise one, how do you plan on doing that if I can't speak like them and you're pretending like you can't?"

I shoved a handful of that delicious not-oyster into my mouth.

"Very carefully. And I'm still going to be teaching you to speak like them when we're alone. Eat up, Taron. We need to cover our bodies with those strange things we stole, fill our bellies, and get out of here. We have a job to do. We can't get distracted by their food. They are still the enemy."

"Maybe not all of them are evil if they make food like this," Taron said, licking his fingers.

"Look at what they did to that fish and tell me every single one of them is not depraved, Taron."

Taron just shrugged.

"Maybe they just don't know better."

"They knew better when they came to our home and started killing people, Taron."

"Kishi, I know. And they will pay for it."

Taron and I were going to make damned sure of that.

CHAPTER 6

If I completely ignored that tiny, dried-up fish, land dweller food was actually delicious. Taron cleaned the flesh off every single one of those fish and kept insisting it wasn't bad. He said it tasted better the more he ate it. I took his word on that and filled my belly with other food from the basket.

We saw how these things covered the bodies of the man and woman before they took them off to play in the water, but actually getting them on our bodies was difficult. What was the point of wrapping your body in these things? Didn't it just get in the way?

Even if they didn't even remotely fit his massive body, Taron's wrappings were easier to manage than mine. He looked ridiculous. I'd be laughing if my legs weren't tangled up in a mess that would make walking more complex, and they expected women to cover their breasts in these horrible things that Taron had to try to figure out how to tie.

Did they have a problem with breasts on land? No one even thought about them under the sea. Mine were always uncovered, and no one had a problem with that. Now, they were smashed, shoved up under my chin, and I could hardly breathe. The white and brown round things were so beautiful. Why would they do this to harmless breasts?

I was sure we both looked totally ridiculous. One wrong move, and Taron was going to split out of those wrappings. I had the exact opposite problem. The woman was much bigger than I was. The only thing that wasn't too big on me was this awful device that was meant for smashing breasts.

Still, I got this feeling this was way more acceptable to land dwellers than showing up the way nature intended. I felt utterly ridiculous, and these wrappings were making the hot air even hotter. I turned to Taron and fell out laughing.

"We look stupid."

"Yes, we do. Walking is going to be even more difficult. You're going to fall on your face, and these things are so tight, I'm going to have to take small steps, or I'll break them."

"I didn't want to have to use it for that, but I took treasures from the ship graveyard. We'll have to buy bindings that fit since land-dwellers insist on wrapping their bodies. It was like that when I saw the ship, and some of the paintings are like that underwater. I never paid attention because I thought I'd never come here."

Taron groaned.

"We could be using it to try more of their delicious food."

"I'm still disgusted you ate all that fish."

"Let's get out of here, Kishi. I know what those people were doing in the water. It feels amazing. Eventually, you get a little sore and have to take a break. It also worked up an appetite.

They are going to come looking for their food and wrappings. I don't want to fight them. Technically, we were the ones that stole from them."

"You're right. If we have to wear these awful things, then they definitely aren't going to want to go back to their village without them. I don't want to kill them. Still, I'd rather them be the ones to deal with their villagers completely overreacting than us. They are still land dwellers."

"You are awful, Kishi. I love it."

I pulled the dagger from my bag so it could guide us closer to the druid king. I had to use my other hand to hold all this nonsense pooling around my feet up, so I didn't trip and stab myself with this enchanted knife. The more we walked, the easier it got. Probably because we couldn't go very fast, or Taron would burst out of his.

We avoided the beach and the land dwellers we stole from until we finally broke through the trees and into their village. It was completely different from my village, but I wasn't totally offended by it. The buildings were closer together and built out of different materials, but they were beautiful in their own way. I found them way less offensive than their ships.

I didn't know the first thing about these people, but I knew a glowing dagger was more likely to get us killed than helped. It was late, but there were still people milling about on the street. Did land-dwellers not sleep? They must have fewer predators that came out in the dark because these people didn't seem worried at all.

I was sure Taron and I looked utterly ridiculous, but no one stared or said anything to us. It was like we were totally anonymous. We could use that. We minded our own business, trying to navigate our way somewhere we could make use of the dagger when three men came spilling out of one of the buildings and knocked me flat on my ass.

Taron snapped into action. He shoved them away from me, but I didn't think he knew the first thing about killing in this body. Still, he seemed to have some instincts. He swung his fists at one of the men, who just narrowly ducked before it connected with his face.

"Woah, there, lad!" the man said. "Do you know who you just tried to strike? I could have your head for that. We aren't looking for a fight tonight. We are drunk and trying to forget our problems. We didn't see your girl and didn't mean to hurt her."

I was hauled to my feet by arms I couldn't see and pressed against a hard chest. I turned around and shoved the hands off me. I'd kill all of them if they tried to hurt Taron for defending me.

"You too?" the other man smirked. "You must not be from around here."

Most of the men I'd seen so far didn't hold a candle to Taron. They were weak looking, and I could have killed them even without an enchanted blade. However, these men would have put up a fight. They were easily the same size as Taron and just as good looking.

The other man who hadn't spoken held up his hand, and magic started crackling. Fucking druids. I just had to get knocked over by a druid. Of course, I already knew they were honorless assholes who violated treaties and mutilated mermaids and sea life. They wouldn't fight fair, and I really didn't want to bring out my enchanted knife until I had to.

"Please, we really don't want to fight either of you. You won't win either way. We snuck out of the palace to get drunk, but if we come back with bruises and cuts on our faces because you managed to beat us, you'll be hunted and killed for it. I've never seen you here, so you are clearly new in town. Personally, the three of us don't give a shit if you beat us in a fair fight because we knocked your girl over, but our father is king here, and he doesn't feel the same. So he'll torture and kill the both of you for laying hands on us."

There was our in to the druid king. Luck was clearly on our side if the first people that spoke to us

were his sons. I could definitely use that. I knew Taron wanted to kill these men for knocking me down, but he was also intelligent. He could see the same strategy I was.

"If I beat them, it would mean getting an audience with the druid king. So how do you want to play this, Kishi?"

"The smart way. We can't kill him in front of an audience and hope to escape. So let's make nice."

Taron dropped his fists and relaxed. To talk or not to talk. That was my primary question. Were land-dwelling men the same as a lot of mermen? They liked it when women didn't know something, and they could make a big show of explaining it, even if they were pretty rotten at actually doing it.

I decided to just go with it and hope for the best. I barely understood half the mermen I lived with. I wasn't about to tackle every druid with a penis in this short amount of time. I opened my mouth and touched my throat to indicate I couldn't speak.

"Can you speak for her?" a man asked Taron.

Taron just stood there like stone. It got pretty awkward until they finally realized he couldn't. They finally realized how strangely we were dressed.

"Look at their clothes. I can't tell what they are from their auras. What if they are refugees from another kingdom? We need to place them under our protection."

"How exactly do you plan on doing that, Forrest? I can't tell what they are either, and neither of them can speak to tell us. What do you think Father will do to them when he lays eyes on them and doesn't know what they are?"

I wasn't mad they hadn't introduced themselves. I was pretending I couldn't speak, so they didn't exactly have my name either. Forrest seemed kind for a druid. He had golden hair and bright blue eyes. His skin was much paler than mine or Taron's, but it still had a golden hue. He was easily Taron's size and much bigger than me, but he just had this face that said he legitimately cared about what happened to us.

"I *know* that, Callum. They are both in danger from him. We can stop it."

Callum had the same golden hair and bronzed skin as Forrest, but it was a bit of a shade darker. His features were similar to his brother's, but they were lined with worry. Was he afraid of his father? Maybe he hated him as I did.

The third brother stepped forward. He differed from the other two. Callum and Forrest were all golden and blue. The third brother had black hair and black eyes. There was mischief sparking in his eyes, and they kept lowering to my breasts before he got concerned for my safety again.

"The safest thing to do is send them back where they came from," he said.

"Really, Beck?" Forrest said. "How do we know it's not worse than what our father is doing? Look at their clothes. Neither of them can speak. We can teach them while we hide them."

This was going much better than I planned. It sounded like the druid king wasn't even liked by his own sons, and coming into my home and slaughtering my people was something he did in his own backyard. Still, I couldn't break out the whole *let's kill your father* thing right away. As much as it surprised me, these seemed like decent land dwellers, and they might balk at that.

Beck rubbed his chin and stared at my breasts again.

"I could stash them in my love nest. Father still doesn't know about it. Instead of keeping to his stupid rules about only taking druid lovers, the two of you long should have gotten you one. Succubae and shifters are *wild* in bed."

"You're disgusting, Beck," Forrest growled. "When he finds out about it, you aren't the one who is going to get punished for it."

Beck just smirked,

"He's not *going* to find out about it. I've made damn sure of that, and people like me better than him."

Man, it sounded like no one liked the druid king. I could use that. Before I could begin plotting, there was this ungodly shrieking, and I was back on my ass. Did one of these land dwellers seriously just strike me in the face?

Oh. It was *those* two land dwellers. Our bellies were full of their food, and we were wearing their terrible wrappings. But, wow, they were angry. Forrest was restraining the woman, and Beck had his arm wrapped around the man's chest. Taron and I could have killed them if we needed to, but neither of us wanted to.

"These people robbed us! I demand justice," the woman shrieked.

Beck seemed to find this entire thing hilarious.

"I'd be more worried about finding clothes. Neither of you looks like you've been jumped, and we all can tell how they got your clothes. You know how my father feels about public fornication, especially since one of you is a succubus and the other isn't. Are you quite sure you want to push this matter and bring it to his attention?"

The woman shot daggers at Beck, and the man was still struggling to fight Taron.

"Shut up, Beck. It's nothing *you* haven't done before."

"I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it, Chloe. I can't entirely agree with my father's rules, but he's still the king. If his guards see you like this, they are going to bring you in. I'd be more focused on how you're going to get home than beating these two up."

Chloe wasn't looking to attack me anymore. Now, all her rage was focused on Beck. She looked like she knew full well she couldn't punch him in the face like she had done me, but she really wanted to.

"We are going to get home in *our* clothes, Beck. I get I can't have them punished by your father without feeling his wrath myself. I *know* the three of you aren't like him. Make them give us back our fucking clothes. It's bad enough they ate our food."

None of these people seemed to get Taron and I hated these clothes and the only reason we even stole them was to fit in. We would have happily given them back if they didn't punish people for not wearing these horrible things.

The three brothers seemed to know the couple we stole from. However, Taron and I were strangers, and they didn't know what we were. Forrest wanted to shelter us and keep us safe, but not all of the brothers agreed on this.

I expected them to make us give the clothes back, and I had no problem with that. It wasn't easy getting into them, and I wasn't quite sure how to take them off. If someone helped me, I'd happily give them back. Taron went to remove his. We didn't even have to communicate to agree on that.

We were both utterly shocked when Forrest and Callum started stripping off their clothes and handing them to the couple. There seemed to be this massive difference between clothing meant for males and what they required females to wear. I would have much preferred wearing what Taron had on.

Something appeared to be going on that I didn't even remotely understand. Wasn't someone going to be punished for walking about without clothes? I thought that rule was stupid, but you had to be strong to survive in the ocean. I would have stolen those clothes anyway because I certainly didn't want it to be Taron and me in trouble for this stupid rule.

The land dwellers were more familiar with this than we were, but Forrest and Callum still

stripped down until they hardly wore anything. Chloe and her beau didn't seem to care about nudity on the beach or when she found me and hit me, but they both happily took the clothes and put them on.

I was regretting pretending not to be able to speak because I had questions. Now, the brothers didn't have clothes, and no one was trying to assault me.

"There, see?" Forrest said. "If anyone sees us, my father will just assume we had too much to drink and make excuses like he always does. So forget you met these two. We'll reimburse you for the clothes."

"And the food," the man said. "That was the best cheese and pie in the entire kingdom, and I paid a ton of money for the wine."

"Your charity is astounding," Callum growled. "These two may have ended up on the same beach as you because of a shipwreck. Why else would they be there with no clothes and have to steal yours?"

Taron made this noise. We were both trying not to laugh. I didn't even have to speak to try to explain things. They just made things up to explain anything they didn't understand. I could definitely use that.

All the stealing and exchanging of clothing appeared to make up a few minds. Chloe and her partner went on their way like Taron and I hadn't ruined their night. The brothers appeared to have come to an agreement now that they were wearing way fewer clothes.

Beck slapped Forrest on the back like this was all funny.

"I have an entire wardrobe in my love nest. We can get dressed there. They should fit our strange new friend too. Nissa owes me a favor, and we can trust her. She can make something that fits for the female."

"Well, let's get there before someone sees us," Forrest said. "Father won't believe we lost our clothes without a fight. Let's just hope Chloe and Gerard get home before someone sees them wearing our clothes."

"Chloe knows *all* about sneaking around when it comes to men," Beck said.

Callum smacked him on the back of the head.

"You're disgusting, Beck. I think our new friends come together, and he doesn't care about who our father is. Keep your cock away from this one."

"You can insult me later, Callum. But, if you two want to play dashing princes, you might want to get some trousers on and get your new playthings off the street."

Forrest and Callum snapped to attention. It was hard to hide Taron, but even though they hardly had any clothes on, they tried to form a circle around us, so no one saw us as they led us through their village.

My face still stung, and I was pretty sure Chloe left a mark, but so far, this was going way better than I had hoped.

CHAPTER 7

I wasn't exactly sure what a love nest was or why Beck had to keep it a secret from his father, but it was quite lovely, even by mermaid standards. Taron and I were both gaping at the beauty, but Forrest and Callum just seemed offended by it. They still hadn't put clothes on and just wanted to complain.

"This is too much, Beck," Callum said. "This isn't just a place to hide your lovers from Father. You could rent a room for that. Instead, you bought an entire house to bring women to. It's gross, and he's going to find out."

Taron and I were just standing there awkwardly. I thought this place was pretty, but it wasn't even remotely furnished like anything under the sea. I was pretty confident they meant some of those puffy looking things for sitting, but the three brothers were still standing. I didn't want to make assumptions. I planned on using them to get close to their father long enough to kill him, but I didn't have to be rude about it.

Beck put his hands on his slim hips and glared at his brothers. I still didn't think legs were appealing at all, and he would look *much* better with a tail, but Taron and all three brothers had this deep V on their hips where I was used to seeing scales. It was oddly appealing, and I wanted to lick it. Maybe Taron would let me later.

"If the two of you were smart, you'd buy something away from him too. I don't just bring women here. This is where I retreat to when he's being especially awful. I have a fully stocked kitchen, so I don't have to eat it when he's spouting that nonsense that eating the parts of prisoners he's killed makes him more powerful. We all know that's horse shit, and he's insane. So instead of sneaking food out the kitchen and hoping the servants don't rat me out, I fill my belly here."

I barely contained my growl, and so did Taron. If we lost family and friends like that because the druid king wanted to *eat* them, I would kill him slowly. The brothers finally noticed us standing around in the clothes we stole.

"Forget our father," Forrest said. "We need to focus on helping these two. He's gone even crazier since our stepmother fell ill. He doesn't care who he hurts as long as he cures her. She's just as bad as he is and keeps encouraging him. The both of them would make sure these two disappear so they could try to make a remedy from them."

"It sounds like we need to kill this stepmother too," Taron said.

I just adored Taron. If either of us had been remotely sane and less pissed off, we would have gone back to the sea and helped sink ships. It would be dangerous enough to kill the druid king, but he wasn't acting alone when he came to my home. His wife needed to spend time with that enchanted dagger too.

"Preferably before they kill someone else trying to prevent nature. It sounds like they've been hunting in more places than just our home."

"Here, come sit," Beck said, guiding us over to one of the puffy things.

I was trying not to laugh and blow our cover. It was pretty comfortable, but sharks never needed to sit on anything in the ocean. He managed just fine in the sand but wasn't having a good go of things now. The things they had to sit on here were soft and not carved from stone like in the ocean. I was comfortable, but Taron acted like he forgot he had bones for a minute and nearly slid onto the floor.

I tried to keep it in and failed. Taron shot me daggers when the laugh escaped my mouth. Forrest and Callum both had odd looks on their faces, but Beck broke into a big smile.

"Seems like the strangers have a sense of humor. I wish they could tell us their names."

"Maybe they can eventually," Forrest said. "They've obviously been through something. Maybe they just need time before they can speak again. If not, we can always teach them. We'll have to do it in shifts, so we don't draw attention to this place."

Callum got out and set something in front of us on the table.

"You seem to understand us just fine, even if you can't speak. Did anyone ever teach you to write?"

I needed them to think I couldn't speak so they could be big, strapping men and teach me. There were limits to how far I was willing to take this, and I needed to give them something. I could admit they had been nothing but friendly so far, and maybe not all land dwellers were evil. I had a feeling if one of them took the throne, there wouldn't be ships in my home anymore.

I nodded my head in agreement. Of course, writing underwater differed from how they did it on land, but I wrote my name and Taron's down for them. Beck grabbed my hand, and his lips grazed my knuckles.

"It's an honor to meet you, Kishi."

Taron flat out growled at Beck, and Callum hit him for whatever that strange introduction was. I wasn't offended, but they were. Although, honestly, it felt a little nice.

"Why are you growling, Taron? He wasn't trying to hurt me. I think that was one of their customs."

"I'm not sure, Kishi. I just really didn't like it when he touched you."

"They might do that a lot here. But, trust me, if I ever don't like it, I can handle it myself."

Taron started sulking, and Beck was glaring at Callum.

"We're fucking princes, Callum. I was being polite. If we got hit in the head every time we greeted someone properly, we'd all be slobbering fools because someone knocked something loose."

"Yes, well, her mate doesn't seem to know that custom, and he doesn't like it. He might rip your head off with his bare hands."

"I probably will," Taron said.

"You aren't my mate, Taron. What's gotten into you? We aren't here to kill them. They've been nice so far. We'll only kill them if that changes."

Taron grunted and nearly slid onto the floor again. The brothers picked up on that right away, but Beck knew better than to laugh. Either that or he'd hit his tipping point as to what he found amusing with us and now officially found us too strange for him. He just kept staring with this weird look on his face.

"That shipwreck theory is holding water," Beck said. "They aren't from our kingdom or anything nearby. The couch seems to be giving the big guy problems. We're going to need to do way more than just teach them to speak. This is probably a huge culture shock. It also runs a bigger risk of Father

finding them because they got curious about something."

The druid king was clearly insane. I don't even think his sons liked him. They seemed to think they were safe from him, but I saw the massacre he ordered in my home. It was only a matter of time before he turned on them too. They probably knew that, and I needed their help, not sending us away because they were afraid of him.

I regretted pretending I couldn't speak for a minute, but I had other reasons for that. I needed help teaching Taron. Before I could get their attention and try to communicate in other ways, they dropped a tidbit that told me they were probably decent druids, and if I could just get one of them on the throne, my home would be safe again.

"We'll need to be alert for shipwrecks," Forrest said. "Father sent his best ship out, and he's been secretive about it. He never sends one without a big announcement and massive amounts of fan fair. We only knew about it because we saw the ship leaving the dock before we could stop them and ask what they were doing. All Father would tell us when we asked was that he was exploring other options for a cure. If he weren't planning something terrible and thought he might lose that ship, he'd be blowing out hot air to anyone that would listen about his genius finding the right magic to cure her."

I started frantically waving my hands and making noises. Depending on the currents, they might only find the wreckage from one ship. My home was far into the ocean, so they wouldn't get much of their supplies back. Still, I needed them on my side.

I wasn't comfortable telling them what Taron and I were or the real reason we were here, but they needed to know that ship hurt people. I barely knew them. They might not care about a few sharks and a mermaid, but Taron and I did. They might not even think about who made their home in the ocean or the entire culture we had there, but Taron and I were right in front of them. They couldn't ignore us, even if I were lying about so many things.

"I'm going to murder him!" Callum snapped. "Lucinda has lumps in her breast. If she had let the palace surgeon remove them as soon as she found it, it wouldn't have grown and spread. She told anyone who would listen they were her best feature and the entire reason Father married her. He didn't deny it and try to talk her into the surgery. Now, it's too late, and they are doing crazy things to cure her."

"This has gone too far," Forrest said. "He couldn't be reasoned with before Lucinda got sick. He wasn't this insane when our mother died. He's been doing this under the guise of cracking down on crime, so people still support him, but he's sending ships in the dead of night to kidnap people now."

"What exactly are we going to do about it, Forrest?" Beck snapped. "We're druids, not shifters. It's not acceptable for us to challenge him to a fight and kill him to take the throne. More people like him than hate him. They'd kill us before we could give them a bullet list of the things he's done they don't know about."

They really just needed to get Taron and me close. We'd do all the work, then disappear back into the ocean. The three brothers could blame us and pretend like they never knew us. They were already primed for killing him, but I knew we couldn't just spring that on them just yet.

Forrest had been nothing but sweet. He was the first brother who offered to help us, and when Chloe wanted to fight me for her clothes, he was the one that started taking his off first. That sweetness was gone. He was angry now.

"Then we do this the druid way—with our brains and magic. Unfortunately, father and Lucinda have broken several druid laws, even before she got sick. So we have to plan this carefully while helping these two."

I was happy to let them plan this the druid way as long as it ended with sea vengeance—with an enchanted dagger in his gut while he bled out slowly.

CHAPTER 8

This place had plenty of bedrooms, but Beck assumed Taron and I were together in ways we weren't and put us in the same bedroom. I didn't dispute it because I needed Taron close to me, but Taron had gone a little crazy. Sharks were territorial creatures, but it was usually limited to their hunting grounds and protecting those they were sworn to protect.

Taron and I had been friends since we were children. He had always looked out for Seira but knew I could handle myself in the water. He was different on land. Neither of us had any experience fighting out of the water, but we'd both killed way more dangerous creatures than three sexy druid brothers. Where did that thought even come from? They didn't even have tails, and they were sired by the man who killed my sister.

I was glad I was a fast learner because I was picking up all these new terms and having to file them away for later. They all made such a big deal about being naked on the street, but when we got back to Beck's love nest, the brothers never got dressed. They left their underpants on to walk home and didn't put more clothes on while they talked and showed us around. I couldn't say I was angry about that. The view was pretty nice, even if they had legs.

Taron had a lot of clothes to choose from, even if I didn't. It probably wasn't considered appropriate here, but neither of us really cared. We closed the door and stripped naked, the way they meant us to be. I just wanted to get some sleep, but Taron had this look on his face.

I'd never had legs before, but my feet were killing me. I wasn't fond of that feeling at all. I fell into the bed and cried out in surprise when I bounced back up. We padded carved stone with seaweed to sleep under the ocean. It was pretty comfortable. This was totally different, but not in a bad way.

Taron snapped to attention.

"Did the bed hurt you?"

"You don't need to kill the bed, Taron. It's just different. Lay down and get some sleep."

Sharks didn't really lay in bed to sleep. Taron was taking all this in like a champ. He didn't question anything. He just did it. Taron flung himself into the bed, but he didn't stop there. He yanked me to his chest and flung his leg over mine.

"What are you doing, Taron?"

"I laid down and just wanted to. Shut up, Kishi. This feels nice. I can't do this as a shark. You're lying if you say you don't like it."

"I never said I didn't. It's just weird you have a land dweller body now, I have legs, and we are even doing this. Why do you keep growling at the brothers when they touch me?"

"Because my instincts have changed, Kishi. I know exactly what they think when they do that. Land dwellers don't have to be fertile to mate. You want to all the time, and it feels good. Unless

you are fertile right now, and that explains everything."

I bit him on the arm, and he growled at me. This so wasn't the kind of conversations Taron and I usually had. It wasn't needed because we weren't even remotely compatible. I didn't think about it when he went off to chase a female shark, and he wouldn't have tried to fight someone if I decided to settle down with a merman and I wanted to play with him.

"I'm not fertile, Taron, and it's weird you're even asking."

"Don't bite me again. It makes me want to mate."

"You're worse than a teenaged merman, Taron."

"Talora didn't prepare me for this. It's unbearable."

"How do you make it stop?"

"I went behind a bush and used my hand, but then I think about you, and it just starts up again. It's worse when you aren't wearing those clothes."

"Did it happen with Chloe too? We need to be focusing on what we came here to do."

"She was appealing to the eye, but it wasn't the same. I didn't like her because she struck you. I would have rather killed her than mated with her, but her anger was justified."

"Are you going to be able to focus on what we came here to do?"

"I didn't kill your pet druids, did I? I don't like them touching you or how you look at them sometimes, but I know they are the only way we can do this and live through it. We're going to need a plan for them to escape. It doesn't sound like they are fond of their father, but he's still their blood. Their plan for him might not involve death. They might not react well to his death. Especially if they figure out we used them to do it."

I was honestly feeling a little bad about that part. I came here intending to destroy anyone who got in my way. Before I set foot on land, I wouldn't have had any issues using the druid king's sons to get to him. I should have known better than to judge all land-dwellers because of what they did back in my home.

That treaty had been in place for longer than I had been alive. I would have known if it had been violated before now. Land had plenty of things we didn't in the ocean, but the people that lived there were the same. There were going to be good and bad whether you were on land or under the sea. There were plenty of mermaid villains, and some of the sirens and sea witches seemed to revel in it.

The three brothers were sweet, and I didn't really want to use them. I'd ideally like to work with them to get rid of a tyrant and put one of them on the throne. I didn't trust them just yet, but I had this feeling if they eventually knew the truth about what Taron and I were, we wouldn't be in danger from them.

Maybe if they met Taron, they would keep their nets in shallow water where even sea creatures could agree the food lived. I needed to see this through. Our people might not welcome us home for this, but we could make life better for them.

I was here to kill the druid king, but I wasn't an evil mermaid. I could do that without destroying his sons.

CHAPTER 9

The bed was very comfortable, and it was beautiful sleeping wrapped up with Taron, but morning hit me way harder than it did under the sea. It wasn't just that Taron and I were up late. I used to stay up late with Seira all the time. It was just so damned bright here without meters of ocean filtering it out.

Taron and I still weren't used to wrapping ourselves in clothes. Beck showed us where he kept the food, and we were both starving when we woke up. We forgot to put them on when we wandered out to get something to eat. We didn't even think about how this wasn't our house, and the three brothers wanted to help us.

Forrest was waiting for us, and he had prepared food. I didn't know what I was smelling, but it smelled amazing. Forrest didn't even blink.

"Is this a thing where you come from? Would you be more comfortable if I got naked too?"

I felt myself breaking into a gigantic smile. I wouldn't mind it in the slightest if he removed his clothes, even if he had legs. Taron grabbed my arm and stomped to the bedroom.

"I know what you're thinking, Kishi. I detest these bulky clothes, but I dislike the idea of you staring at Forrest without them even more."

"I was planning on staring at you too. You'd be so pretty with a tail."

Taron puffed up his chest and would have spent the rest of our time on land without a stitch of clothing if it wouldn't mean Forrest would remove his to make us both feel comfortable. I had a feeling the three brothers thought we were both very strange, but I thought it was a little weird they were so lovely to us when it involved being naked.

I was giggling when I pulled Taron back out of the bedroom. Forrest saw us and broke into this huge grin. Taron just grunted. I couldn't help smiling back.

"The two of you certainly aren't shy. Are you hungry?"

I nodded and pulled Taron over to the table. I honestly had no idea what I was looking at, but it smelled amazing. Forrest had more of that white stuff I enjoyed last night, so I snatched it up and shoved it in my mouth. There were strips of white and brown things. Taron picked it up and licked it. His eyes rolled back in his head in pleasure, and then he crammed it in his mouth.

Forrest just had this serene smile on his face. I desperately wanted to know what we were eating. I met his blue eyes and pointed at the food.

"Ah. That's cheese. Taron is enjoying the bacon. Those are eggs, and that's toast."

I *definitely* liked the cheese. I think it was my favorite thing about land. Taron seemed to be plowing his way through the bacon. I looked at the eggs. That couldn't be right. We ate eggs in the ocean. This wasn't like any eggs I'd ever eaten before. It was solid except for the center and much

bigger. I poked it with my finger, and it bounced a little.

I drew back and frowned. Taron didn't have any reservations. He scooped up the eggs with his fingers and shoved them in his mouth. Taron let out another little moan. He was such a fucking shark.

"That's gross, Taron."

"Actually, it's pretty fucking good. Try it."

Forrest handed me a shiny silver thing. It was one of Seira's favorite things from the ships, but neither of us could figure out what it was for. He handed one to Taron too.

"This is a fork. We use them for eating."

Forest sliced off a piece of his eggs, speared it with the fork, and brought it to his mouth. That was pretty handy. I wasn't on board with the eggs, and Taron looked at the fork like it slapped him. I watched the way Forrest held his and tried to mimic it. I ended up dropping it.

Forrest jumped out of his seat and stood behind me. I felt his arms wrap around me as he tried to teach me how to use the fork. I let out a little sigh. He just smelled so good. Then, Taron let out this strangled noise and tried to drive his fork into Forrest's arm.

Forrest jumped back and just barely avoided getting stabbed. I jumped out of my chair and tackled Taron. He went flying back, and I straddled his chest. I wrapped my hand around his neck and hissed.

"Stop it, Taron! That was harmless. There are three of them and one of you. I don't want you to die because you got jealous."

Taron held up his hands and blinked at me.

"I'm over it. Sorry, Kishi. I just really don't like it. So I'll try to ignore it."

I jumped up and offered him my hand to help him up. We both pulled our chairs back up to the table and resumed eating. Forrest was still standing back, staring at us. He warily made his way back to the table.

"Taron, how about I teach you how to use the fork, and you can teach Kishi? Getting stabbed by a fork is nasty business."

Taron just grunted and shoved some of the toast in his mouth. I just sighed and nodded at Forrest.

"Is he going to get stabby again if I touch him?"

"Taron? Are you going to get offended if he touches you instead of me?"

Taron just smirked at me.

"I won't know until he touches me. This is my first time being anything but a shark, Kishi. This is new to me."

Forrest was eyeing both of us a little too curiously for my tastes.

"I get the feeling the two of you can communicate just fine with each other. Can you talk to us the same way?"

Damn. Forrest was way too smart for his own good. He wasn't even close to figuring out what we were or what we were here for, but we definitely needed to be careful around these men. We communicated with sonic pulses land-dwellers couldn't hear under the water. Taron and I could still do that. I knew Forrest and his brothers couldn't listen in, but damned if he hadn't figured out something was up.

I shook my head no to indicate that I couldn't communicate with Forrest the same way I did with Taron, then gave a half nod at my shark friend that there was a fifty percent chance Forrest would get stabbed with a fork if he laid a finger on him.

"Okay, big guy," Forrest said. "I'm guessing you got that scar over your eye defending Kishi, and you didn't lose that fight. I have no desire to fight you. We're just learning how to eat with utensils."

I fell out laughing because I had *nothing* to do with that scar. I had to listen to Taron bragging

about it for ages. A fine looking female shark came into our home to breed, and Taron got that scar fighting off the other male sharks. He was way prouder he won the fight than the fact that he got to breed for the first time. It was a total one-eighty from how he was with legs because now he seemed hyper-focused on mating.

Forrest cocked an eyebrow at me.

"I sure wish you could tell me why that is funny. I can heal it, but I would imagine getting stabbed with a fork isn't remotely pleasant."

I'd give it to Forrest. He didn't know what Taron was. His scar was pretty impressive when he was a shark, but it gave him his air of danger now that he had legs. I'd been cut by plenty of things in the ocean, and that fork didn't seem sharp at all. It would take a lot of force to break the skin, and Taron was capable of that.

I held my breath as Forrest reached out to Taron. It was like he was in a strong current and moving in slow motion. The brothers had been nothing but patient, but I swear to Trident, if Taron ruined this over a fork, I was going to be furious with him. I was more nervous about this than Forrest was, and Taron would never hurt me.

Taron didn't assault Forrest with the fork when their skin made contact. He didn't growl either. Instead, Taron just let out a grunt and let Forrest teach him.

"This is more acceptable than him having his hands on you, but I would rather it be you touching me."

"Oh, shut it, Taron. Pay attention to what he's showing you. He could be teaching us both, but you tried to stab him."

"I regret nothing."

"If they don't end up killing you, I might. I don't care how pretty you are."

"No, you won't. You love me, and we're in this together."

"Then stop acting like Zale. Remember him? I was nice to him once. He thought that made me his girlfriend and his property. Zale acted like it was adorable when I threatened to gut him with an oyster shell. You had to threaten to eat him to get him to back off."

"I am so not acting like Zale!"

"You just threatened to stab a druid prince for trying to teach me to use a fork. You're acting worse than Zale."

"Zale was the spoiled son of a councilor. He thought everyone was his property. I know you're not, but I really don't like it when they touch you. I don't trust them just yet, either. I get they are kind and our best shot at pulling this off, but you are forgetting everything you know because it's easy. Vicious, uncontrollable sharks never give birth to decent offspring."

Taron wasn't wrong. We revered sharks and lived side by side with them. Most of them. Some sharks preferred the criminal life. They swam in gangs and didn't care about who they killed. Not a single one of their offspring ever decided to be a decent shark and get away from them. The same could be said for plenty of sea creatures.

"I know, Taron. But your instincts have gone a little mad since you became like them. We can still stay here while we figure out if we can trust them. We have a bed and food. They are teaching us how to fit in here. They haven't given us a reason to think they are like their father. They gave their clothes to the people we stole from. Maybe they are just nice."

"Yeah, they've been nice so far, but something makes me want to bash their heads in when they touch you. Remember Seira and my family. Think about all that blood in the water. We may be totally fucked by the time we figure out they are exactly like him."

I knew that, and I was still risking it. But, if they were playing some weird mind game, they were playing it exceptionally well. By the time Taron and I finished our conversation, he could use a fork, and no one was bleeding.

Forrest stayed safely in his chair while Taron got all grabby. He insisted on teaching me from his lap. He definitely would have stabbed Forrest for that. I wasn't angry about it. It was kind of nice. Taron was dealing with some things right now, and if he needed to touch me to do that, it wasn't an unpleasant sensation.

I just needed him not to get angry when the brothers touched me. I knew there was a chance they could be just as bad as their father, but I just had this feeling they were allies.

CHAPTER 10

Taron didn't totally trust them, and I knew I probably shouldn't, but they were making it hard to be objective. I was a reasonably attractive mermaid. I felt hideous with legs, but that was the only thing about my appearance that had changed.

I hadn't seen many people who looked like Taron or me here, but the people had I met were attractive. The male gaze was the same on land or sea. I could tell the three brothers liked what they saw but weren't acting on it because they thought Taron and I were mates. But, of course, Taron wasn't helping that notion at all, and I wasn't trying to clear it up. I didn't need any attachments to land after I took care of my business.

Forrest picked up on a lot. Some of it, I didn't want him to, a lot of it, I was grateful for. For example, he quickly learned that Taron was possessive and didn't like people touching me, but he also picked up on the fact that even though neither of us spoke, I did all the communicating for both of us.

Taron didn't need to nod or shake his head when he was a shark. They didn't do that. We read their body language and communicated with sonic pulses. Taron had picked up a lot of this land stuff reasonably quickly, but I knew exactly why he wasn't bothering with this.

It was partly to do with his newfound jealousy and a lot to do with the fact that Taron never did anything he didn't want to. He'd probably caught on to that just as quickly as he learned to use a fork. He wasn't being stubborn and trying to ruin this, though.

While Forrest was watching us and picking up things I didn't want him to, Taron watched the brothers and tried to figure out if he could trust them. Yeah, sometimes he got distracted because he was thinking about mating again, but I knew Taron was invested in this and could focus when it mattered.

Still, I kind of wanted to strangle him. Forrest didn't want to get stabbed by random objects, and he'd picked up on the fact that Taron grunted and growled a lot, but if they asked us a question, I was the only one who answered them. Forrest was trying to teach us to speak, but he was focused on Taron. Taron was acting worse than a grumpy stonefish when you disturbed their reef.

He had his arms crossed, sulking like a teenage mermaid who had just been grounded. Forrest was trying to teach him to say his name, and you'd think a sea witch wanted one of his teeth for a spell. Forrest hadn't even gotten to me because Taron was acting like this was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. I knew for a fact that wasn't true.

"It'll be easy once you start trying," Forrest said. "Just let it roll off your tongue. Taron."

Taron just grunted and settled himself into the couch. He was managing sitting much better, but he definitely didn't want to talk.

"Taron!"

"This is stupid. It's not my fault they aren't advanced enough to communicate like us."

"Mermaids, sirens, and sea witches can do this too. Are you telling me you aren't capable of doing something every siren can do?"

I knew that would get him motivated. Taron wasn't fond of sirens at all. He'd eat a land dweller if they came into his territory, but he didn't seek them out for food the way sirens did. He honestly thought they tasted pretty nasty and liked to rant endlessly about sirens wanting to eat them instead of fish.

Taron stopped sulking and finally looked ready to try, but Forrest jumped to his feet and shouted like he was excited by something. Then, before he could even tell us, Callum came into the room.

"Beck is keeping Father busy, so I was able to slip away. He's trying to find out more about that ship that left. Father is agitated and has soldiers patrolling the beach. He hasn't mentioned these two, though."

"I think I figured something out about these two. I just need Kishi to confirm it."

Ugh. Taron wasn't the only person watching and figuring things out. But, of course, they were. We had just barged into their lives pretending not to be able to speak, and they didn't even know what we were. I just hoped whatever came out of Forrest's mouth wasn't about to complicate what we came here to do.

"They can clearly understand us, and Kishi can write. Taron has been fighting me on speaking his name, and I think I just figured out why. Druids have all this magic to force people to talk. Vampires can use coercion with eye contact and get the truth about anything. We don't know what they are or where they came from. They seem very unfamiliar with anything we have here. What if they've been spelled not to speak?"

A whale would have given Forrest multiple points in mermaid school for everything he'd managed to figure out so far, with us giving him absolutely nothing to go on. He had more patience than my dolphin nanny when it came to Taron. A dolphin would have beat anyone around the ocean for sulking like that, much less threatening to stab them.

He was totally wrong about that, though. I would imagine taking someone's voice was the type of payment a sea witch would want for coming on land. Most of the time, the magic they gifted you gave you precisely what you thought you wanted, but their price always made it impossible. So we really lucked out that the only thing Talora wanted was revenge.

I was conflicted on how to play this. I could let them try to find the magical answer and pretend I could speak, but Taron really needed to learn. On the other hand, he didn't want to, and I could make something up about why he didn't.

"How do you want to play this one, Taron? I can pretend to let them use magic to bring my voice back and teach you to speak in private. It'll give you less time to figure out if you can trust them."

"This is perfect, Kishi. Even if we can trust them and have their help, the druid king isn't just going to let us stick him with that knife. I have useless teeth here, and you don't have your tail. We know druids have magic, but not much about it. We know it involves the parts of other creatures. We need to know more about it."

I had the same thought process Taron did, but he was my partner in crime, and I'd always run my plans by him first. Still, I hadn't thought about that part, and all that blood in the water was still fresh in my mind.

"I don't want them killing anyone because I'm faking not being able to speak."

"So, stop them. Maybe not all druids do that. They don't seem to like their father for doing it."

"It's a gigantic risk, Taron. We can't leave the house to stop them."

"Maybe I'll want to kill them less when they look at you or touch you if I know I can trust them. Maybe if I see what they are capable of, that'll happen."

"I think that's your singular penis talking, Taron. It seems to speak for you sometimes. You would have gotten your ass beat all over the ocean for that stunt with the fork, and Forrest didn't hurt you at all."

"No, I wouldn't. They don't expect us to eat with complicated devices in the ocean. If Forrest grew a tail and brought that stupid fork to the ocean, he'd get eaten by something much bigger than him in minutes. And don't go picturing him with a tail! I don't like it."

Too late. Forrest would make a seriously sexy merman. All the mermaids would fight over him because he wasn't a massive jerk like all the pretty mermen.

"See?" Forrest said. "They keep doing that. They have a way to talk that we can't hear. I asked Kishi, and it's not possible with us. So it's entirely possible they've been spelled."

"Maybe," Callum said, scratching his chin. "Or maybe they really can't speak the way we do because they talk in other ways."

"So, we ask her. I understand women way better than you and Beck do. She still has other ways of communicating, and I'm not going to pretend to speak for her."

"Shut up, Forrest. Neither of us does that. I was making my point, and then I was going to ask her."

"Well, then we can agree we both respect women better than Beck."

"Beck likes women a little too much and, by all accounts, spoils them rotten. This isn't a pissing contest. Kishi, has someone spelled you and Taron to lose your voices?"

I nodded my head. I was already lying to them about a lot. Maybe I could have told them exactly what their father did to my sister and Taron's family and still have their help and protection. But I couldn't risk it.

I was still starting to feel bad about all the lies I was telling these brothers.

CHAPTER 11

Callum and Forrest never left our side. They also seemed to bicker more than clownfishes. They didn't disappear and return with some poor soul's parts, but they seemed to be taking this seriously. Callum disappeared and came back to spread out all kinds of things on the table. Forrest tried to gently convince Taron to let him touch me and use magic without Taron getting creative with something in this house.

Callum didn't seem the slightest bit worried that if Taron had his shark teeth, he'd probably take a bite out of Forrest. Instead, he seemed engrossed with what he was doing. I really wanted to watch over his shoulder, but I needed to keep an eye on Taron.

"I can do both of you at the same time," Forrest said. "I'll have to touch Kishi to do it."

Taron wasn't having it. He bared his teeth at Forrest. Did he think that was scary? His teeth weren't sharp anymore, and he couldn't even handle fish bones. Forrest drew away like Taron's new teeth were even capable of doing the damage they used to.

"I'll only touch her shoulder, and it won't hurt at all. You both might feel a little tickle."

Whatever Callum was doing was starting to smell funny and had this blue mist floating above it. He barely even looked up.

"They might be bonded like shifters. The wolves will pick a fight if they suspect you are even thinking about it. If Beck weren't a prince, he would have gotten his ass beat by now. So why do you keep pressing it if Taron clearly doesn't like it?"

"Because I don't know any other way of helping them. Kishi, can you convince him to let me try?"

I snorted and rolled my eyes so hard, they nearly popped out. I'd been trying to do that this entire time. I didn't think Callum was paying attention to us, but I heard him laugh.

"You aren't going to win this battle, Forrest. It sounds like she's already tried, and he likes her way better than he likes you. He's already tried to stab you once. It's probably a shifter thing. They are probably just a type we don't have here."

I had a feeling Taron was enjoying many things about this new body, but he'd always been very proud to be a shark. He just *had* to let out a slight growl at the suggestion we were shifters and nearly blow our covers.

"He doesn't like that either. You've always bragged about being better than everyone else with potions. So if I can't find the right magic through touch, we'll have to use a potion. And soon, because so far, the only thing I think Taron does like is food, and I really don't want to get stabbed figuring him out."

I brushed Forrest's arm where Taron couldn't see to get his attention. I shook my head for him just to drop it and start on Taron because there was the definite possibility of Taron losing it again. But,

instead, Forrest gave me this look like he really didn't want to give up on this.

He really wanted to solve the mystery that was us. But, unfortunately, Taron was being a little insufferable, and Forrest was totally overlooking that. I'd already had this conversation with Taron several times, but I was the only one of us who could actually speak, so one of them would eventually need to touch me.

This time, I knew part of the show was because Taron didn't want this strange magic touching me. He wanted to take it on himself, so he could figure out if he could trust them. He seemed to be forgetting I needed to feel their magic, too, because killing the druid king would take both of us. We both needed to learn what their magic felt like.

Talking sense into him when he was like this was pointless, so I decided to compromise. There were two types of druid magic at work here, and we needed to know both of them if we hoped to survive this. So let Taron deal with Forrest, and I'd sample whatever Callum was working on.

Forrest kept laying his hands all over Taron and asking if he felt any different or could speak now. Taron just sat there grunting and scowling.

"Taron, play nice. He's going to give up if he thinks it's not working."

"He won't. He's kind of tenacious like a horseshoe crab."

"You can still be nice about it while he tries. Forrest is trying to help, and he's being respectful of your stupid rules of not touching me."

"Fine. I'll be pleasant to your pet druids, but his magic feels funny. Sometimes, it makes me cold. Other times, it's hot. Sometimes, it feels like swimming through a bed of really slimy kelp, and I don't like it."

"You don't like anything here but the food."

"I enjoyed sleeping next to you in that nice bed. Ew. It feels like swimming through a bed of really slimy seaweed now."

"You need to be focusing on other things. How can we fight this kind of magic?"

"Easy. By removing his hand and breaking his fingers. He can't do this unless he's touching me."

"They aren't shifters like we know," Forrest said. "I scanned Taron for magic. It's strange. I don't know what he is, but his magic feels wet and tastes salty."

Taron growled and removed Forrest's hand from his arm. Forrest grunted because Taron wasn't letting go and was bending his fingers back. For once, I wasn't mad at Taron, even if I really didn't want him breaking Forrest's hand. We needed to know what kind of magic druids were capable of, but I didn't want them figuring our secret just yet.

Forrest managed to get his hand away from Taron and didn't look like he intended to try again. But, of course, I wouldn't either, with Taron being so territorial over me.

"We'll have to try potions," Forrest said. "I've tried every healing spell I know when someone has been hit with magic. I tried a basic curse removal, but without knowing what's been done to them, it's too dangerous to go any deeper with that kind of magic."

"No shit, Forrest. I'm trying to do the exact same thing with potions. I know the right potion for anything if I actually understand what I'm dealing with."

Beck came charging into the room loudly enough to startle everyone. Callum nearly spilled his potions. Taron wasn't the only one here who liked violence. Callum threw something at Beck's head so hard, it sailed across the room and shattered against the wall.

"What was that for? And why are you into my potions supplies? Use your own. It took me ages to gather all these ingredients."

"It's an emergency, stupid. Kishi and Taron can't talk because of magic. So we're trying to help remove it."

"You're both stupid if you think you can remove a curse from these two. We all learned when we were children that we couldn't remove a curse unless we know what it is. So how are you going to figure out a curse on two people when we don't even know *what* they are?"

"And you're lazy if you don't even want to try," Forrest snapped.

"I'm not saying we shouldn't, but you know better. You could make things worse."

Callum just grunted and threw something into his potion.

"Why did you come running in here like you were on fire and make me almost ruin this potion I've been working on?"

"Father is angry. His scouts returned to report wreckage on the beach, and it was definitely his best ship. Father wasn't angry about the lives of the crew he sent. He was angry they failed the mission he sent them on. He's being tight-lipped about what he wanted, but he's not sending ships to look for survivors."

"If the wreckage has reached shore already, then they haven't been anywhere we don't know about," Forrest said. "The currents wouldn't have taken it here, and none of the other surrounding countries would attack us."

"Unless they came from one of the islands everyone thinks is empty," Callum said.

"The ship had to have been far out based on how little wreckage they found," Beck said. "If there were any survivors, they are still in the water holding onto parts of the ship. No one could have made that swim."

This conversation was totally going the wrong way. Even though there was plenty about land I didn't know and needed to figure out, this was the first time I felt out of my depth. Even if I wasn't pretending I couldn't speak, I didn't know how to explain this in a way that would make sense to them.

I didn't like where this was going at all. They were only a few steps away from thinking we were their enemy and giving us to their father. I started out just intending to use them to get to their father, but they had been nothing but kind to us so far. I wanted to work together, but I started this so wrong with my lies. I couldn't fix it without breaking their trust.

"Not necessarily," Forrest said. "When I touched Taron, I tried to use magic to figure out what he is. I still don't know, but it reminded me of being in the ocean. Taron didn't want me using magic on him anymore when he found out I had done that. So it's entirely possible they could have swum here."

"You're supposed to be the smart one, Forrest," Callum said. "It's an excellent theory and the only one we have, but if these two are part of a secretive island race, why would they swim here instead of home if they could?"

"Focus on your potions, Callum. I *am* the smart one. You know Father. Look at Kishi and Taron. They both have excellent musculature. Taron threatened to stab me with a fork for touching Kishi. Neither of them would have gotten captured without a fight. Their people would have fought. Father hates witnesses and loose ends. You can imagine what the crew left behind."

"Just stop," Beck said. "We're throwing out all these theories right in front of them, and they can't tell us anything yet. Father isn't looking for them, so we have time. There's an excellent chance they are here because Father hurt them somehow. We're probably making things worse trying to figure things out."

Beck would have been correct if Taron and I were anyone else. We weren't focusing on our losses at all or even remotely dealing with it because we were throwing ourselves into killing the

man responsible for their deaths. We'd both have to deal with our grief eventually, and it was probably going to hit harder than a whale's tail, but for now, we were utterly avoiding it. Their theories didn't bother us. They weren't onto the truth just yet, but they knew their father was an evil man.

I had a feeling these three druid princes had the best education in the entire kingdom. They'd figured *a lot* about us by just observing us. All three of them were pretty damned close to the truth about us, even if they weren't there yet.

They knew the truth about their father, though. Their immediate thought process when we met was that he was going to hurt us. Now that they had spent time around us and were trying to learn more about us, they'd figured out we were only here because their father had done something awful.

They hadn't hit on one significant truth. We were here to kill their father and his wicked wife. But, honestly, we probably weren't the only people who wanted him dead.

I was honestly hoping *they* wanted him dead too because pretty soon, I was about to drop this farce I couldn't speak, and I really didn't want to hurt them.

CHAPTER 12

The brothers took a break to feed us. Callum stayed engrossed in his potions while Beck disappeared and brought back food. There were things I hadn't seen before and things from the sea that I recognized. Sort of. They sure did strange things to fish on land.

Beck said it was flounder when he served it to us, but that didn't resemble any flounder I'd ever eaten. It didn't look like a fish at all. The skin and bones had all been removed, and it was covered in something thin and yellow that didn't smell all that bad. Still, the bones and the skin were the best part. Why in the world would anyone remove them? It didn't look nearly as unappealing as that fish we stole on the beach.

Forrest was with us over breakfast and seemed to get we were unfamiliar with their food, so he tried to explain in greater detail.

"That's flounder in a lemon butter sauce, spinach and goat cheese, fresh bread from the market, and strawberry rhubarb pie."

The flounder was unrecognizable, but I'd had cheese and pie before. Those were delicious. Still, the flounder looked more appealing than the fish we stole. I was a mermaid, and I was reasonably sure even if I had legs, I still needed things from the sea in my diet. Everything else I had tried so far was terrific.

I looked up, and while I had been making up my mind about putting that flounder in my mouth, Taron had already demolished half of his meal. He was such a fucking shark, even if he was currently sporting legs. Sharks would put anything in their mouths and hope it tasted good and didn't make them sick.

"Is that any good, or is it like the time you swam around putting things in your mouth and got a bellyache?"

"It's delicious, and you're being rude not eating it. Sea royalty has servants that do their hunting. They also wouldn't be caught dead, sheltering us or serving us. The flounder is hot, and so is the sauce. This took extra preparation besides just catching it and bringing it home. Beck and Forrest were gone a long time before they brought this out. Whatever was done to the food was done with their hands, and they did it for us."

I was instantly humbled. My parents raised Seira and me to be polite in every situation. Honestly, I'd eaten some strange things in the ocean before. One of our cousins asked to make a kelp cake for Seira's birthday and tried to substitute the pulverized jellyfish. We all plastered smiles on our faces and ate it, even if it wasn't even remotely good.

I decided to try the flounder first. I lifted some of the meat to my mouth with the fork and put it in my mouth. It was very different but quite delicious. Whatever they had done to it, the texture had

changed, but there was an explosion of different but unique flavors in my mouth. I couldn't help the groan that escaped me.

All four men became highly interested in me eating. Callum had taken a break from his potions to eat but mainly had been reading a book. They were all watching me. Taron had stopped shoveling food in his face and was looking at me with one of his eyebrows in his hairline.

"I like that noise you just made," Taron said.

Forrest, Callum, and Beck seemed like they enjoyed it as well. Forrest and Callum looked enchanted, and Beck was smirking at me.

"You seem to be enjoying the flounder considering you looked like someone slapped your mother when we brought it out," Callum said with a gentle smile.

"I've never seen someone so offended by fish before only to make sex noises after they got over it," Beck said. "I think it's a testament to my cooking skills."

"You're just asking for a fork stabbing, Beck," Forrest said.

"I didn't lay a finger on her."

"You're doing everything else, asshole. You're looking and flirting pretty hard."

I think we all knew that. Flirting was the same on land too. Taron had been around enough mermen to know they all liked that noise that escaped me when I tasted the flounder just as much as he did. Taron had always been a little weird. He apparently had zero issues with them looking at me a certain way or flirting. Taron didn't care if they were obviously thinking about it like he was, but his hard-line was touching, even if it was totally harmless.

"Taron hasn't come at me. Maybe he's secure enough in their relationship that he just doesn't like touching."

"What is the deal, Taron? You went after Forrest with a fork for something harmless, but you're just sitting there eating when they clearly liked that noise just as much as you do."

Taron just shrugged and savagely bit off a piece of bread.

"Do you want me to kill them for that? I didn't dislike it like when they try to touch you."

"You always had weird logic when you were a shark too."

"And you're getting mad at me for feeling things I had no chance of going through when I was a shark. I don't regret taking Talora's magic and coming here, but my emotions were less complicated when all I had to do was rely on my instincts to survive."

"You're right, Taron. I'm sorry. I can't even imagine what you are dealing with. A lot of this is strange for me, but this wasn't even a possibility for you until that massacre. I'll try to be more understanding, but can you avoid the urge to hurt them?"

"I'm trying. I don't like it."

I needed to help Taron. We were here for revenge, but first and foremost, he was my friend. He always looked out for Seira when I couldn't. If everyone hadn't been in danger from those nets, Taron would have saved Seira and his entire family. I knew that just as much as I knew every inch of my home.

"How can I make it better?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll like it better when I know we can trust them."

"What more do you want them to do? They are princes, Taron. They are letting us sleep here, and they made food for us. Neither of us would be this close to mermen princes, and the mermaid court would have had you executed for threatening one of them. All three of them are probably used to touching anyone they please and getting away with it because of who they are. They have been pretty respectful of your no touching rule."

"I know. I get that. I'm just not there yet."

I had an idea, and I didn't know if it would make things a million times worse. But, I still needed to try. I didn't want Taron to be uncomfortable here, and I didn't want him hurting the brothers. We needed to be a team to pull this off. I was starting to feel bad about lying to them. Taron and I both had given them every reason to kick us out of their home, and they hadn't. So, I wanted to be a little honest with them.

I was done eating, and the meal was delicious. Taron might not trust them yet, but I was mostly there. When I visited the mermaid court, the important people there didn't do anything for themselves. They also treated their servants like garbage. We all heard this spoiled mermaid princess thoroughly berate a servant because her kelp wine only had half a glass. Like she didn't have a perfectly good tail to swim herself over and refill her own goblet.

Forrest, Callum, and Beck were the first land royalty I'd met, but I had this feeling they were spoiled everywhere. The brothers weren't like that, and maybe I was stupid for that being one of the reasons I trusted them and was starting to like them. There was a lot to be said for simple kindness.

I set my plate down and stood in front of Taron. I'd done this with plenty of mermen, but sharks didn't do this. It would be Taron's first time. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

Taron might not have done this before, but he instantly reacted. He grabbed me, yanked me into his lap, and deepened the kiss. Taron was a better kisser than half the lothario mermen I'd snuck kisses with who bragged about being the best. I couldn't help letting out another moan. I didn't want to. I wanted to keep doing this. I pulled away from Taron and looked him deep in the eyes.

"What was that for? I liked that. I want to keep doing it."

"An experiment. One we'll explore later when we're alone. Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

I pulled away from Taron and looked at the brothers. Callum and Forrest looked uncomfortable, but Beck looked like he wanted us to continue so he could watch.

"Should we leave you two alone?" Forrest said, clearing his throat.

I shook my head and launched myself at Forrest. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my lips to his. Forrest didn't react like Taron did. He stood there and did nothing. I didn't hear Taron growling, and he hadn't yanked Forrest away from me. Taron was behind me, and I couldn't see him, but that was a good sign so far.

"Kiss her," Beck said. "I'm not sure why she's in a kissy mood, but she's trying to do something, and I think it's working."

"It's a weird process, but he's right. Normally, I don't agree with anything Beck has to say about kissing women, but you need to kiss Kishi, Forrest."

Forrest was so damned sweet. I just grabbed him and kissed him without giving him any warning, but he kissed me back like he was worried about being rude about returning my kiss. It was a sweet kiss, but not a bad one. Forrest definitely had practice.

I pulled away and looked at Taron. He was still seated and looking at us curiously. He wasn't scowling like literally every time the brothers got close to me. Callum was closer, so I moved to him next.

I'd give it to Callum. They seemed to realize I was kissing everyone, even if they didn't quite know why. Callum's eyes were hooded like he really wanted me to, but he didn't grab me like Taron did. I enjoyed it when Taron did it, and kind of wanted him to.

Callum let me approach and wrap myself around him, but once I was there, he totally took control. I never let a single merman boss me around, and there were plenty who were afraid of me. I would

never have allowed that under the sea, but it was pretty fantastic when Taron and Callum did it.

I stopped kissing Callum and got immensely turned on when Beck didn't even wait for me. He immediately pounced.

"If beautiful women are giving kisses in my house, I refuse to be left out."

Every inch of my body was pressed against Beck's, and he kissed me like an expert. I wasn't quite sure why I started all this. I could just feel in my gut that if I kissed Taron, and he saw me kissing the brothers, it would somehow settle his mind a little. It was a strange idea that came out of nowhere, but we managed, and when I looked at Taron, he looked a little more settled.

I didn't regret doing it because it seemed to make things a little better for Taron, but I was pretty sure I'd just opened a brand new oyster. I wanted to kiss Taron again, and I enjoyed kissing the brothers a little too much. But I needed to push that aside because that wasn't what we came here for.

I settled myself back into my chair and grabbed some of the remaining bread. Taron's eyes were glittering and solely focused on me. Then, the brothers all started clearing their throats.

"I'm just going to get back to my potions," Callum said.

"I'm not sure what that was, but I hope it settled something. I'm going to go back to the palace and see if I can get information from Father about the shipwreck. He never really notices when we aren't there unless he needs something. He's eventually going to ask us to do something nasty if he's lost his best ship. I also want to steal some of his maps."

"You both do that. I'll entertain our new friends. There's plenty here I don't think they've seen."

Beck led us both to the couch, and we sat down. Taron pulled me close to him, but I didn't mind.

"Do you feel a little better, Taron?"

"Yes, because they kissed you and stopped. I want to kiss you again and find out what happens after."

Taron had always been one of my best friends, and I knew better than anyone that sex could ruin that. Still, I was curious and wanted to explore things with him.

What happened on land could stay on land when we went home.

CHAPTER 13

I knew better than anyone that being blasé with kisses usually made creatures with different cocks go crazy and was generally a bad idea. Even jellyfish got jealous. I knew when the idea popped into my head that it could make things a million times worse, but I could just feel it in my gut it was the right thing to do.

Taron had visibly relaxed, and I was having a blast with Beck while Callum was off muttering over his potions. Taron was making an effort to communicate as much as he could. He had a perfectly good head now and was capable of nodding, but he hadn't wanted to until I kissed him. I guess that worked on land too. And frankly, I liked sitting this close to him.

Beck had shown us all the art in his house, and I had to admit, it was beautiful. They had materials here we didn't in the sea.

"Wait here. I want to show you my favorite. I keep it in my bedroom so I can look at it before I go to sleep."

Beck jumped up and disappeared deeper into the house. Taron tightened his arm around me and nuzzled my head with his cheek. It felt pretty great, so I squeezed him back. It was such a damned shame he wasn't a merman.

"What do you think he's going to bring out next?" Taron asked.

"I have no idea. How are you feeling, Taron?"

"I'm glad I didn't kill him. He's at least as amusing as a clownfish. I guess the other two aren't so bad either. Forrest is gathering intel on his father, and Callum hasn't given up with those potions because he doesn't know you are faking it. But, of course, if they were going to hurt you, they would have by now."

"Kissing everyone fixed that for you?"

"No, kissing me first fixed it. And you promised to do it again later when we were alone. So you'd better not have been lying through your teeth like a moray eel."

I punched him in the stomach because he knew me better than that. Moray eels lied about everything. Even if they hadn't been doing anything wrong when you came across them, they still lied about it. Everyone knew they never spoke an ounce of truth, but they had this rare gift of telling everyone exactly what they wanted to hear, so sometimes, people believed them.

"Woah, if we are wrestling, I want in," Beck said, sitting next to me on the couch.

His leg was pressed against mine, and Taron didn't even react.

"I'd never lie to you, Taron. I'm fibbing about many things right now, but I've always been honest with you. I liked it too."

Taron puffed his chest out and craned his head around me to look at Beck. Beck pulled a sculpture

from behind his back and set it on the table.

"I bought this from an old incubus on my travels. He swears he saw a mermaid on the beach. When she dried off, she got legs. He helped her get clothes and fed her. He claims they were lovers, and she lived with him for four years before disappearing into the sea one night.

"It takes *a lot* for an incubus to be smitten with someone enough to stop feeding after they've gone. Most people don't want to leave when they've got the attention of one. The sex is incredible, and they are incredibly attentive and caring to those they fall in love with.

"He told me he didn't want to live without her. He stopped feeding and allowed himself to age. While he waited for nature to take its course, he carved these statues of her. He only let me buy this off him because I listened to his story without judging or telling him he was insane for letting himself die for some crazy story. Everyone just assumed he caught something from one of his lovers and had just gone insane. They treated him pretty badly. I've never heard of mermaids coming on land and taking an incubus for a lover. Maybe he was crazy, but no one makes art like this unless they've been in love."

That should have scared me, but it didn't. I picked up the sculpture, and it was beautiful. These land dwellers may have thought he was insane and mistreated him, but this sculpture radiated with energy and love. He knew her secret, and Beck said his kind treated their mates well. I could only imagine the sea called her home, and it was a tough decision for her.

"He carved this one from rose quartz. The druids use it for healing and to amplify love. He used many different crystals and sometimes driftwood for his carvings. An incubus doesn't have the same kind of magic druids do, but he tried some things that are common knowledge that we do for other people to bring her back."

I got that, and I understood the brothers a little better. This crystal was important and had magical qualities. I could feel it just holding it. It was the same in the ocean. We didn't have this particular crystal where I lived, but we coveted certain rocks for jewelry and sculptures because of their magical properties. I didn't just take Seira to the ship graveyard because she was obsessed with land dwellers. Sometimes, we'd swim out looking for rocks.

I stroked the statue. She had been a beautiful mermaid, and the carving was well done. I didn't recognize her from home, but then again, if she had left while I was still a hatchling, I doubted she would have been welcomed back. Taron touched it, but he didn't take it away from me.

"He really loved her. I can feel it."

"You two believe him, don't you?" Beck said.

Taron finally decided to acknowledge a question with a nod right when I didn't want to answer. Beck was fond of that statue and wasn't completely horrible to the man who carved it. He hadn't given me any reason to distrust him, but he was drawn to this statue for a reason. I needed to know more.

Beck just sighed and leaned back into the couch.

"Maybe I do too. All I know about them is that they live in the very deep parts of the ocean and they don't like it when we go out there. Sometimes, our boats have to sail miles out of the way to avoid certain waters, so we don't disturb their homes. I get it, though. There's an entire ecosystem down there we don't know anything about here. Our ships could be damaging it, but until we somehow learn to fly, it's the only way we can travel and trade with some places."

He was half right. I could feel that ship, even though I wasn't close to it, and I wasn't too fond of the way it felt. It wasn't just our ecosystem. Those stupid nets didn't discriminate against what got caught in them. Every mermaid carried a blade with them for protection. Seira wouldn't have snuck

out without the knife I made her. Instead, she was hauled onto that ship and mutilated before she could cut herself free.

"There's an entire culture down there that none of us know about," Beck said. "I have no interest in disturbing it or trying to conquer it if I could breathe underwater, but I'd love to learn about it. We come across sirens sometimes, but they aren't really interested in talking to us."

We couldn't help it. Taron and I started giggling. Even if sirens didn't view land dwellers as food, they were pretty rotten conversationalists. Most sirens were super vain. They liked pretty things and eating, but they had to moan about it all the time. They'd sink an entire ship and gorge themselves on land dweller flesh, then spend the next two weeks moaning about how their meal was going to ruin their figure. Then, as soon as they got hungry, they just swam out looking for another ship to eat. Aside from the few who lived with us, it was pretty much all they ever talked about.

"A siren would tell him how pretty he was right before she ate him. Then, she'd moan to his bones that his flesh was going to make her fat," Taron said.

I started howling with laughter because that was so accurate. No one in the sea wanted to talk to the sirens except other sirens. But, they were friendly to mermaids and sharks. The ones that lived in my home were pretty great, but if Taron and I left the boundaries of our home and came across a group of them, we were polite and said hello, but we made all kinds of excuses not to stay. They knew damned well mermaids didn't eat it, and sharks only did when threatened, but sometimes, they had spare parts around and would offer us random legs.

Beck started laughing with us, and he didn't even know what we found so funny. He reached out and tucked my hair behind my ear.

"I'm not sure why that's so funny, but it's lovely to hear the two of you laugh. Honestly, I wasn't even sure Taron was capable of smiling. Sirens are pretty nasty business. We've been plugging our ears with beeswax if we are in known siren hunting grounds, but sometimes, they surprise ships. Every sailor keeps the plugs in a pouch on their belt, but sometimes, they can't get them in their ears before they hear the song. So we try to bring them below deck, but they are willing to kill their brothers to jump overboard."

I tried to stop laughing since Beck wouldn't know what I found so funny, but Taron and I were doing a miserable job at stopping our giggles.

"Can you imagine the sirens putting all that effort into their songs, and they have to make do with just a few instead of the entire ship?" Taron wheezed.

"I have to give the land dwellers credit for figuring out how to fight the sirens. I mean, technically, the sirens are eating them when they have delicious fish. They don't need to eat everyone on the ship either, and they complain about it, anyway."

"You two are so strange, but I'm dying to figure you out. I don't know a single soul that would laugh that much at the mention of a siren. I've known some men who were dumb enough to think they could survive the song and take one as their wife. No one could convince them not to try. We never saw them again."

Taron and I stopped laughing, and I couldn't help grunting. Awfully presumptuous of these land men to presume sirens married anyone at all. Land dwellers wouldn't enjoy mating with a siren *at all* if Taron's anatomy was any indication. Sirens mated like seahorses, and it was male sirens that gave birth. The male siren stayed in the depths raising the children while the female siren sang and sank ships. Most sailors were male, so it made sense.

"I'd say you were a siren and the entire reason you can't speak is that someone cursed you, so you can't fight back. It makes a lot of fucking sense, but I can feel it in my gut that's not the case. I think

you know more about them than we do, but you aren't sinking ships for shits and giggles."

Did land-dwellers think sirens did all that for fun? Oh, man. When I acted like Callum's potion cured me, and I could talk again, should I tell them? Beck was funny and flirty. He didn't take many things seriously and laughed with us when he didn't know what we found funny. There was still a deep intelligence in his eyes, and I knew he would ask why we laughed as soon as I stopped pretending I couldn't speak.

I made a decision. I was going to tell them the truth.

CHAPTER 14

Callum's potion wasn't totally unfamiliar to me. Mermaids, sirens, and sea witches all had variations of ingredients they mixed together for magical purposes. It was all passed down and kept secret. I couldn't begin to do what a siren or sea witch could make. They didn't have the same magic as mermaids, so they couldn't make ours either.

Mermaids swam to the surface and called the lightning to fuse our ingredients together. Sirens sang to theirs. No one knew how sea witches did it because they always did it in their caves where no one could see them doing it. Sea witches were notoriously secretive about their magic. They were happy to sell it to any unsuspecting sea creature, but they weren't about to explain anything about it.

Callum used something orange and hot. It scared me a little, especially when Beck yanked Taron back when he tried to touch it. Callum explained it was something called fire, and it had the power to kill all of us. He seemed to be keeping it small and controlling it, but I really didn't like it. I knew exactly what lightning was capable of, but I also trusted it not to kill me. Unfortunately, Callum didn't seem to have the same faith in his fire.

He seemed to be able to put it out, so it didn't kill all of us when he needed to, but he still wasn't finished.

"It's getting late. This potion needs to be charged by the full moon, and we're in luck that she's out tonight. I'll put this in the garden, and it should be ready in the morning. After that, we need to get back to the palace. Everyone expects Beck not to slink home until noon, but I'm supposed to be the dependable one. Someone will report to my father if I come home late, and he's already paranoid."

Beck slapped him on the back and guided him towards the door.

"If you got laid more, you wouldn't have to worry about his paranoia."

"You're disgusting, Beck."

"No, I'm smart. I'm playing to his weaknesses. He cheated on our mother constantly. The only reason he's faithful now is that she's just as depraved as he is. He thinks druid men need lots of sex to function properly. You should have played that angle years ago. Then, he'd trust you more."

"And the fact that you *really* enjoy sex has nothing to do with that."

"As I said, I'm the smart brother. I'm manipulating him in the most pleasurable way possible. But, we need to get back because you know how he gets when he thinks people are plotting against him."

Callum looked back over his shoulder at Taron and me.

"Are you two going to be okay for the rest of the night?"

Taron puffed up his chest, yanked me to him, and gave Callum this exaggerated nod. I was glad he was making an effort to communicate now, but it was pretty obvious he wanted them to hurry the fuck out of the house so he could get his kisses.

Beck knew that full well because he grabbed Callum and yanked him towards the door.

"They're going to be just fine, and Taron wants some alone time."

As soon as we heard the door close, Taron scooped me up and went running to the bedroom. He tossed me on the bed and started stripping his clothes off.

"I know you don't like those legs, but it's much easier to carry you when you don't have a tail. Now, get naked and give me those kisses you promised."

"Give me a minute to enjoy the view. It's a damned shame you aren't a merman. You're so pretty, and I like you better than any of the mermen back home."

"Well, I currently have legs, and so do you. I was pretty offended when I found out land-dwellers only get one cock, but it feels pretty nice when I pull on it, and I don't even need to wait for a fertile female shark to show up."

"What the fuck? Why are you pulling on it?"

"Because it feels nice."

Taron was standing there totally nude. His cock was standing straight up. It was different from a merman's but not totally unappealing. I stood up and walked over to him. I wrapped my hand around it and gave it a gentle tug.

"Like this?"

Taron hissed and gave me my answer. He definitely liked this. I enjoyed it too. It was like there was this warm pool in my belly. Taron grabbed me and kissed me while trying to rid me of my clothes. I helped him. His skin was so hot, and I wanted to feel mine pressed against his.

I had certain instincts as a mermaid, and I'd never had legs before. So as soon as Taron picked me up, I wrapped my legs around his waist. He carried me over to the bed and set me down gently. Taron dove into bed with me, and he started nuzzling my neck.

"I want to eat you alive, but not like when I was a shark."

I wanted to be eaten. I wanted to eat him too. There was so much I wanted to do, but I wasn't sure how to mate like this. I was so frustrated, and I just needed him. I let out a growl and pinned him on his back. Taron gripped my hips and looked at me with hooded eyes. He ran his hands up my side until they settled on my breasts. I threw back my head and hissed when he pinched my nipples.

"Do that again."

"I will if you do mine."

I did Taron one better. I leaned down and bit his nipple. His hips jerked, and Taron decided I was no longer running this show. He flipped me over and pinned me on my back. Taron bared his teeth at me to show dominance. He was bigger than me, and I had nothing to prove with him. I didn't need to fight Taron. He was my friend, and I liked this.

I settled into the bed and blinked at him.

"Did you not enjoy that?"

Taron shook his head to clear it.

"I did. I want to do it to you. May I?"

"Stop being polite. I liked it when you weren't."

"Kishi, you knocked Caspian half across the ocean for doing exactly that. He's terrified of you, and you bragged about it for months."

"Caspian is whale excrement and had it coming. You're a shark, Taron. When a female shark shows up to mate, you don't ask permission for anything. You fight the other sharks off and take what you want. You were pretty proud of that scar the first time you mated. That's what I want right now. I want you. I don't want you pretending to be something you're not because you have legs."

"Fuck, Kishi," Taron growled.

Taron dove into my neck and started licking and biting. I clawed my nails down his chest and arched my back. This was definitely going to change everything between us, but I wouldn't stop this. Taron and I started this together. I thought I would hate everything about land and the people who lived here, but I could admit when I was wrong.

I enjoyed the things they had here, and I wished I could explore and see more. I thought I would hate legs and still sometimes pictured Taron with a tail as a merman, but his were rather lovely if I had to look at him with legs. Nothing was stopping us from exploring how land-dwellers mated when we both clearly wanted to.

Neither of us knew exactly how this worked, but it certainly felt good. Both sharks and mermaids fought a lot when it came to mating. Taron had to fight off other sharks, and mermen had to earn it. There were perks to getting right to it and not having to beat Taron half across the ocean with my tail until he may be proved he was worthy of mating with me. That part was kind of fun, but it was nice to be able to skip it with a friend.

Things felt different with legs, and I had no desire to fight Taron. We were both trying to figure out how this worked, but we were fast learners. Especially Taron. If he did something and I reacted a certain way, he doubled his efforts, and I certainly enjoyed them.

Please don't ask me how he found this spot between my legs because female sharks didn't have it, and it was different when I had a tail. I think the creator made mating feel good. Otherwise, females would refuse because childbirth was painful. So I had a spot inside my tail that was pleasurable when stimulated, but it appeared to be on the outside when I had legs.

Maybe having legs wasn't so bad because when Taron licked that spot, my eyes rolled back in my head, and I thought I was going to die. But, of course, Taron knew that full well too because he held me down and did it harder and faster. Damn, he was good at that considering a few days ago, he had two rows of deadly teeth that it wouldn't have even considered letting near my sensitive bits.

Taron bit down, and my entire world exploded. I shrieked and lost all control over my body. That was certainly interesting and amazing. Then, Taron kissed his way back up to my mouth and pulled me to his chest like we were done.

"Don't tell me you're ready for bed, Taron. I'm pretty sure that's not all there is to land dweller mating."

"It's not, but we're a long way from home, Kishi, and neither of us is what we were in the ocean. Do you even know how to stop us from making a pup? I'd be honored to sire one with you, but I'm a shark on land, and you're a mermaid with legs. We don't even know what you would hatch or even if it could survive in the ocean. You can't exactly go back to the ocean for supplies, and we don't even know if the mermaid tricks for that would work on land."

That was pretty fucking logical, considering Taron threatened to stab Forrest with a fork because he was jealous. I wanted more. I was ready just to charge ahead and experiment. I knew every trick in the sea if I wanted to mess around with a merman, but this was new to me.

It also felt fantastic, but I was feeling a little greedy. Taron did all that work pleasing me, and now he just wanted to hold me because land mating was complicated. It didn't have to end here, though. Taron gave me a lot of pleasure with just his mouth. Maybe I could do the same to him.

I shoved Taron on his back and took his cock deep in my mouth. It wasn't totally horrible, and I got the exact reaction I wanted.

Maybe land mating wasn't totally complicated. There were certainly a lot more options than there were in the sea.

CHAPTER 15

Taron and I both went to bed satisfied, and things weren't remotely weird when we woke up. We were getting the hang of this land stuff and didn't walk out of the bedroom naked again. Beck was waiting for us this time with an entire rack of clothes.

"You must be tired of wearing those clothes you pilfered from the beach. Don't tell them I said this, but I'd gladly give Chloe and her bedmate my clothes again just to watch that reaction again. Taron is my size, and I can tell a woman's measurements just by looking at her. These should fit. Does that earn me another kiss?"

I was pretty confident Beck meant me. I didn't know what had gotten into Taron. Taron stepped forward and gave Beck a huge kiss. I'd give it to Beck. He didn't flip out or try to hurt Taron. He kissed him back. Honestly, it was a little sexy. A merman would have killed Taron for that. The ones that wouldn't generally found another merman mate and made their homes away from ours. I found the entire thing rather stupid and didn't understand why they had to leave.

Beck and Taron seemed to be enjoying their kiss, but when Taron pulled away, he clapped Beck on the arm like I didn't just watch him like it.

"What was that for, Taron?"

"He asked for a kiss in exchange for the clothes. I like kissing you. I enjoyed watching you kiss him. So I decided to experiment like we did last night."

"I'm pretty sure he meant me. He could have gotten mad about it and hurt you. Did you get what you needed?"

"His face is scratchy and not soft like yours, but you've already kissed him. He's good at it."

Beck cleared his throat and smoothed his rumpled shirt down.

"That was unexpected, but not unwelcome. You're probably going to want to clean up before you put fresh clothes on. When I bought this place, I made just it had an excellent bathhouse added. I've already used magic to heat the water for you."

"What is a bath, and why would we want to swim in hot water?" Taron asked.

"It doesn't sound pleasant. Just play along."

"Why are you playing along, Kishi? You're going to get a tail as soon as you get wet, and it wasn't pleasant when you got your legs."

Taron went to stand between Beck and me. I got a whiff of Taron. I sniffed myself. Wow. That was bad. Sometimes, sea snails died in their shells and rotted there. Snails were good eating, but you had no way of knowing if you were going to get a face full of stink and rot when you picked it up until you did it. We weren't quite as bad as that, but we stunk.

"I think a bath is to get this stink off us. We don't smell good, Taron."

Taron turned around and made this big show of sniffing me.

"I like your stink."

I gave Taron a shove to follow Beck because I didn't like this. I enjoyed a lot about land so far, but no one stank in the ocean unless they died. I'd happily deal with the irritation and endless itching of peeling my scales if this bath meant not smelling like this anymore.

Beck led us to the back of the house and out a door. There was a garden back here that was quite lovely. I didn't know what any of the flowers were or if they had a purpose, but they were certainly pretty. There was a smaller house out here, and we followed Beck inside.

There was a large pool of water that took up most of the floor. It wasn't deep and would be useless for swimming. Still, land-dwellers couldn't breathe underwater, so they probably didn't want to drown to get this stink off of them.

I couldn't properly swim in that pool, but I really missed my tail and wanted to get in the water. So I started stripping off my clothes, and Taron followed my lead.

"Woah!" Beck said. "The two of you certainly aren't shy. I'm not sure what you are or where you came from, but I get the feeling it's a very free place, and I'd love to visit and soak up your culture."

Taron bared his teeth at Beck. He didn't care that the two of us were naked, and Beck was staring pretty hard at both of us. Taron knew I wanted to get in the water and wasn't quite sure about Beck knowing the truth yet. Beck held up his hands and started to back away.

"I'll leave the two of you to it."

I wasn't looking at Beck as he left. The pool of water was calling to me. I was reasonably certain there wasn't a grain of salt in it, but Beck made it appealing. There were pretty purple flowers floating on the surface, and they smelled amazing. Ocean water always smelled like home, but this was nice too.

"Do you want me to guard the door in case he comes back?"

"Get in the water, Taron. I know you miss it, and you reek."

"That water is pointless for swimming, and it smells funny."

"It's not for swimming, and you smell funnier than this water. Get in."

Taron sulked, but he lowered himself into the water. I joined him. If losing my tail was itchy and irritating, getting it back was downright painful. My tail dried out, and I had to peel it off to get my legs. My legs had to fuse together, and my feet turn into fins to get my tail back in the water.

It wasn't instantaneous and seemed to take forever. Finally, Taron pulled me into his lap and held me tight while I bit down on my lower lip so hard, I tasted blood. I wanted to shriek my way through it until it was over, but I didn't need Beck rushing in to check on me.

It was endless and probably the most pain I'd ever experienced. I'd been cut by poisonous coral, stung by jellyfish, and been bitten by some nasty fish that just so happened to be poisonous and very tasty. That was *nothing* compared to this.

I was watching the progress when I could actually open my eyes. My purple and blue scales were coming back, but it wasn't over yet. I still had feet. I couldn't help it. When my feet started to lengthen to form a fin, it was so painful, I couldn't stop myself from shrieking.

My fin came quickly, and the pain stopped, but it was already too late. Beck kicked the door in and came charging in. He saw me sitting in Taron's lap in all my mermaid glory. Beck's mouth fell open, and he looked at us in utter shock.

"Holy shit. There's a fucking mermaid in my bathhouse. I need a minute. This is amazing! Wow. You're beautiful, Kishi."

Taron tightened his arms around me so much, I could barely breathe. He was growling at Beck. I

honestly didn't want to hurt him, but I was helpless in this small pool without a weapon. Taron and Beck were similar in size, but Beck had way more experience fighting like this than Taron did.

"Woah, hold up a minute," Beck said. "We're all friends here. Do you realize what kind of danger you're in from my father? He's willing to try *anything* to save my stepmother. He'll kill anyone he wants, hoping to use their organs and magic in a cure. He's gone through every known species on land. We can try to keep you safe from him, but maybe it would be best if you went back home to the sea."

Beck and his brothers weren't my enemies. They weren't even remotely like their father. I knew then, and there I could trust them. Beck's eyes were glued to my tail. Land dwellers never saw my kind. Now that I knew how painful it was, I had a feeling the mermaids that came to land rarely got wet, and if they did, it was never in front of people.

Beck wasn't trying to use me for anything. He'd never seen a mermaid before, but he didn't want to keep me here for his own amusement. He didn't want to own me. He wanted me to go back where I was safe. But my people would never be safe as long as the druid king lived.

"We can trust him," I said to Taron.

"Unless you can't," Beck said. "I know my father, and I know he's resorted to terrible magic that any druid knows doesn't work for her. His kingdom is a major port, and everyone who goes out to sea knows to avoid certain waters because of an agreement with the merfolk. He violated that agreement, didn't he?"

I nodded. I really wished I hadn't pretended I couldn't speak. If I had known about this whole bathing thing and that it was so painful to get my tail back, I probably would have played this differently. But, unfortunately, it was only a matter of time before one of them found out I was a mermaid, and they were pretty damned intelligent figuring out most other things too.

"I need to get Callum and his potion. I'll get Forrest too. We need to know exactly what he's done, and it's high time we heard your story from your own lips. He's gone too far this time and needs to be stopped. Do you need help? It seemed to hurt you when you changed."

My secret was out. Beck probably had a million questions about Taron since he clearly had legs. Taron bared his teeth at Beck and hissed. He was okay with touching and kissing. Taron probably knew as much as I did, we could trust him, and we needed him.

But my tail was sea business. Beck may have seen it, and I trusted him to keep it secret, but touching it and helping me with it was something that was between Taron and me.

CHAPTER 16

Taron had never been this mad at me before, and he had some serious opinions about some of the mermen I'd dated or some of the stunts I got up to just for fun. I'd always been a bit of a thrill-seeker, but I'd tried to be careful on land. Of course, I didn't intend for the brothers to find out what I was when we met them, but I would have had to have given them something, and it worked out in the end.

"Was it worth it, Kishi? I couldn't stand hearing you in pain like that, and now Beck knows the truth. I told you I liked your stink, and you insisted on getting in that smelly water, anyway."

"The water smelled amazing, but we didn't. It worked out for the best. I'm starting to dislike lying to them. As soon as I took that potion and acted like it cured me, they were going to ask what we are. I was going to have to come up with something. This nasty feeling in the pit of my gut has lessened now that Beck knows I'm a mermaid."

"That's because of the cheese they eat here. It passes once you have a bowel movement in those strange rooms they have for that on land."

"Taron, quit being a fucking shark. You don't like it when people lie to you either."

"I liked watching you scream in pain less. And I know it's uncomfortable losing the tail too."

"Do you want to drop this, Taron? We can go back to the sea and hope they welcome us back. We can help sink any ships that come back. You wouldn't have to deal with me being in pain again, but more mermaids and sharks could end up in those nets. Take me out of this bath and help me get rid of my tail or decide that we drop this and go back to the ocean. It's up to you."

"Damn it, Kishi. Don't put this kind of pressure on me. Both scenarios are bad."

"No, they aren't. My pain and discomfort stop. You can leave the room if you don't want to witness it, and I'll be perfectly fine when you get back. A lot of creatures in the ocean won't be fine if they get caught in those nets. I can deal with the temporary pain of changing. I can't abide by more lives lost. Especially when all three brothers have repeatedly told us that the kind of magic their father is doing doesn't even work. Lives are being lost on land too."

"Fine. But I don't enjoy watching you in pain."

Taron stood and carried me out of the pool. He let out a little grunt and set me on the floor.

"I get you prefer your tail over those legs, but my back hurts much less carrying you when you have legs."

"Sorry. I like being in your arms, though. So, you're with me on this?"

Taron kissed my forehead.

"I'm always with you, Kishi. The three brothers aren't bad. Although, I will admit that Beck's reaction to your tail was worthy of a shark."

It really was, and that was unexpected. Before I came to land, I assumed land dwellers would want to hurt or own us. Beck didn't do that. Instead, he wanted us to go back to the sea.

I trusted Beck unconditionally now. I really hoped Forrest and Callum reacted the same way because I was coming to care for them.

CHAPTER 17

The door to the bathhouse was splintered and hanging off the frame, but Beck still knocked anyway. He just kicked it in and came running when he heard me screaming. It wasn't like he hadn't seen everything. This was his house, and I wasn't sure why he needed my permission to come in.

I was already dry, and Taron had helped me peel my tail off. We were trying to figure out my clothes. Taron was already dressed. There were many things about land I really liked, but I didn't understand why the clothes for females were so much more complicated than the males.

Forrest and Callum always talked about how much Beck liked women. He certainly kissed me like he did. He kissed Taron like he loved everyone equally. I didn't think he was being cruel with these clothes. I was reasonably certain all women on land were expected to wear this, but I didn't know which person was being mean when they started this trend.

Beck stuck his head in and didn't even blink. Taron and I were standing next to the remnants of my tail, trying to figure out how to keep the top of this dress from falling down and exposing my breasts. Personally, no one cared about that in the ocean, and I wasn't ashamed of anyone seeing them on land, but I was far from the sea, and this is what people did here. Even if I thought it was worse than having to listen to a chatty starfish.

Beck barely glanced at my tail on the floor. Instead, he sprang to attention to help me with these clothes.

"I wouldn't have suggested the bath if I had known changing was this traumatic for you. Some of the old-school druids don't believe in bathing in water. Instead, they cleanse themselves in blessed oil with herbs. My stepmother is all about that, and my father has demanded we make it for her on many occasions. Maybe that will allow you to get clean without having to deal with all that pain."

They worried about the strangest things on land, but I didn't enjoy stinking like that, so I was willing to try his magic oil. With Beck's help, I was dressed in no time. He stepped back and gave me a gentle smile.

"A lot makes sense now. You probably eat flounder way differently where you come from. I hope I did it justice."

Beck was just so perfect, and he was handling this much better than I expected. I needed to let him know the flounder was delicious, but I had to start that stupid idea of pretending not to talk. If I had known everything I knew now, I wouldn't have tried that because I thought I needed to manipulate them. I felt worse about that the more they proved to be amazing men.

Still, there were other ways to show him I enjoyed the fish. I grabbed him and kissed him. That was something we both would enjoy, and it would confirm the fish was good. Beck broke away first

and smirked at me.

"Mermaids are certainly affectionate. Taron didn't have a tail, but whatever he is seems to enjoy giving out kisses too. Of course, the two of you need to be careful. The safest thing for you is to go back to the ocean, but if you keep giving out kisses like that, I'm going to get attached. Forrest made one of his epic breakfasts, and Callum is putting the final touches on his potion. You ready?"

Beck held out his arm, but I wasn't sure what he wanted me to do with it. I just stared and waited for him to explain. Beck grabbed my arm and wrapped it around his. It was nice being close to him, and he smelled good, but I wasn't sure why he did it.

Taron wasn't one to be left out, and he seemed to be a lot more friendly with Beck than he was with Callum and Forrest. He took Beck's other arm and wound his around it. Beck didn't blink, and I loved he was so kind to Taron.

"Shall we?" Beck said, moving towards the door.

I didn't need help walking, and I knew where the house was. I was unsteady at first, but I'd figured out my legs already. Still, this was a little nice. I didn't think Beck was trying to control me or that he thought I was ignorant and couldn't find my way to the house. He just wanted to be close.

This felt supportive. We didn't do this in the ocean, but sometimes, it was nice to swim close and let your fins brush against each other. Beck looked over his shoulder at the remnants of my tail.

"I'll clean that up after you eat. I'm not sure if there's something special I should do with it to show proper reverence. Honestly, it would be best to burn it, so no one finds it. But, if you left this on the beach, I should probably go out there and deal with it."

I just nodded and rested my head on his arm. He was nicer than most mermen I'd met, and that was unexpected considering he was a prince. A merman would have wanted something in return for all of this. They certainly wouldn't have offered to clean up the mess you made without immediately demanding something for it.

When we got inside, Forrest had gone all out with breakfast, but it wasn't like what he served us the day before. He looked about ready to burst.

"Hi! Beck told me. I understand why you kept looking at the fish like you didn't want to put it in your mouth. You seemed to enjoy it, though, so I decided to cook you an entire feast to show you how we eat seafood here on land. I know it's not the same, and you might hate it, but we eat it here too, and I just wanted to show you how we enjoy it here."

Forrest was adorable. He was babbling like a hatchling who had just been allowed a little bit of freedom and got to see one of the colorful reefs outside our community. I was still mad about that fish in the basket we stole, but the flounder Beck had served us was delicious. I was actually happy to try more of it here.

Forrest had this look on his face like he didn't know if he had done something wrong. He looked like I would totally crush him if I didn't eat this food. I was going to and would do so gladly, but I didn't like that sad look in his eyes, so I kissed him.

I broke away and sat at the table with everyone. Taron had already scooped massive amounts of food on his plate and seemed to be eating it without a care to what it was, but then again, he did that in the ocean all the time too.

Some of the food, I recognized, and some had been altered in ways I didn't. For example, the lobster was a strange color, and the mussels looked strange. The oysters looked like what I was used to, but they had already been opened, so I didn't have to deal with the hassle of doing it myself.

I could have gone straight for the oysters since that was familiar to me, but I didn't. These men knew my secret and had been nothing but kind about it. They were trying to show me the best things

about their world and how it was similar to mine in some ways. I wanted them to teach me.

I pointed to everything before I put it on my plate. Forrest and Beck told me what it was and how they had prepared it. I didn't hesitate this time, and I didn't need to talk myself into trying it. It tasted different than what I was used to, and when they cooked it, it changed the texture. It wasn't horrible. It exploded in my mouth with different flavors, and everything was excellent.

What was more than that was that everything they served me was things we ate too. We didn't get angry about them taking these things from the water to eat them because most everything in the ocean viewed them as food too. Before I came to land, I thought they should only take things from the land instead of eating things we ate, but I got it now.

We ate the things we did because they were delicious, but also because they often bred enough that we could stay fed without causing a famine. I used to think land-dwellers would cause my people to starve with their nets, but now that I'd dined with them, I knew that wasn't the case.

The brothers lived near the sea, and yes, this meal was all seafood, but it wasn't the entirety of their diet like mine was. I had been served plenty of delicious things that came from land. They had plenty of options for food, and I wasn't angry they decided to take some from the sea anymore. They didn't eat every part of the fish as we did, but they weren't really made to.

I couldn't stop smiling. I forgot all about the druid king for a minute. I shouldn't be having this much fun with his sons. Even Taron was laughing, and Beck and Forrest were flirting pretty hard. I thought I knew every inappropriate joke in the ocean, but there was a whole mess of them on land I hadn't heard. Of course, Beck knew all of them, and Forrest would get so offended when he would tell me one.

My stomach was hurting from laughing. Especially when Forrest finally realized I wasn't some delicate creature from the ocean and found that kind of humor funny. That was when I realized Forrest had a bit of a dirty side too. Callum and Forrest gave Beck a hard time for this house and because he liked women, but Forrest knew his share of dirty jokes.

Forrest launched into one about a land-dwelling werewolf with two cocks, and that was when Taron finally stopped laughing. He reached over and put his hand over Forrest's mouth and let out a little grunt. I just rolled my eyes. Taron probably would have laughed if he let Forrest finish, but sharks took their two cocks seriously. The one he had now was perfectly lovely, and I wasn't equipped to handle two of them with a tail or with legs. He still lamented a few times last night that he just had the one, and I had to stroke his ego that I still had fun.

Beck fell out laughing.

"That's one of my favorite jokes. Taron didn't have a tail, so I still don't know what he is. At this point, it wouldn't shock me if he fought off a two cocked werewolf who tried to get handsy with Kishi."

Taron didn't want to hear that joke, but he found *that* hilarious. Of course, I already knew what he was laughing about. He probably thought it was preposterous that any creature on land was as blessed with cocks as a shark was.

Callum came strolling in with two containers full of blue liquid. He set them on the table and glared at Forrest and Beck.

"The two of you are like teenage druids with the jokes you find funny. Unfortunately, not everyone finds that funny."

"Kishi does," Beck said. "Taron did too until we got to werewolves with two cocks."

"Well, now you can ask him why he found it offensive. And we can ask these two why they are on land. The potion is ready."

“Our father had something to do with it. You have to know that,” Forrest said.

“Oh, of that, I’m sure,” Callum said. “I also paid attention during our history lessons. The only reason anyone on land agreed to avoid certain parts of the ocean was that the merfolk sunk every ship that sailed there. They are perfectly capable of defending their homes. We saw the shipwreck. The two of you are so excited about meeting a mermaid, you aren’t even thinking about what she’s doing here or if there are more of them. They used to be content to stay in the ocean and sink ships, but they had an agreement with us, and now it’s possibly violated. How do we know this isn’t a declaration of war?”

I needed Callum on my side, and I didn’t like the way it felt that he thought I was here to hurt him. Yeah, I was totally here to murder his father, but I wanted to do it in a way that his sons were safe.

I had no idea what his potion would do to me. If I could take this whole speaking thing back, I would. I was already losing Callum’s trust. I had no choice.

I grabbed his potion off the table and started gulping it down.

CHAPTER 18

I'd pulled some idiotic stunts in the ocean and lived through it. Drinking this potion was right up there with speed racing with Taron through rebel shark territory. I didn't know what it did other than it was supposed to remove the curse I was faking. Still, I started this, and now I needed to see it through or lose their trust forever.

I slammed the glass on the table and immediately doubled over in pain. Everyone ran to me, even Callum.

"Shit!" Forrest yelled. "Did you brew it right?"

"Druid potions haven't exactly been tested on mermaids, asshole. I was going to suggest waiting on the potion and the two of you going out to scout for more of them, but she just grabbed it and drank it!"

"Because you were being a dick and throwing out accusations."

I knew this feeling. I felt it in the pool. My legs were fusing together, and they couldn't see it because of the dress. I shoved their arms away so I could make it to the floor before I fell on my face.

The druids were checking everything but what was under my skirt, but Taron knew right away. He shoved their hands away and ripped the skirt all the way to the neck of the dress. He parted it so it wouldn't get in the way. I would have communicated with him I was grateful if this didn't hurt so fucking much.

Everyone seemed furious with Callum, but he didn't make me drink that potion. Forrest smacked Callum on the back of the head.

"Look at what you did! What if she's stuck like that? How are we supposed to sneak her back into the ocean?"

Oh, shit. I didn't even think about that. I couldn't even fathom them before, but what if this potion took my legs away? I wasn't wet, so getting dry would not produce legs. I had regrets.

My legs were breaking out into purple and blue scales, and I wasn't even trying to hold in my screams this time. And then suddenly it was over. The pain stopped, and my scales started flaking off. Taron set to work rubbing them off while the brothers just sat back and stared.

Taron had always watched my back, and now it was my turn to protect him. They knew he wasn't a merman because they saw him in the water with me. What they didn't know was that the only reason he was here was that a sea witch had cut him and put magic inside him.

Callum's potion nearly forced me to change without water. It was meant to remove curses. If it did something to the magic inside Taron, he would turn back into a shark right here and die. Unfortunately, we were too far from land to even get him to the beach, much less deep enough water for a shark of his size.

"I'm okay," I said. "Hi."

Taron helped me to my feet and crushed me to his chest in a hug. I pulled away and turned to the brothers.

"Taron can't drink that. He can't communicate the way you do because he's different in the water. So he has to be taught. He was gifted magic by a sea witch, and I fear your potion will undo it, and he'll die."

"You have witches in the sea capable of that kind of magic? That's amazing!" Forrest said.

"What exactly is Taron?" Callum asked.

"Sh-sh-shark," Taron said.

I gaped at Taron. Since when could he speak like that? Actually, I wasn't shocked. Taron was brilliant, and he picked up this land stuff faster than I did. He was also incredibly proud of what he was. Taron wouldn't have wanted to be left out now that I was speaking. He might have pouted and refused to try at first, but he liked the brothers now. Taron also never liked it when people spoke for him.

"That is so badass!" Beck yelled.

"I so want to hear everything about the culture under the sea," Forrest said.

"Stop!" Callum said. "Yes, it's amazing we have a mermaid in this house and that they have magic in the sea capable of sending a shark to land. We need to make sure all of this wasn't to gather intel to wage war against us."

I wasn't pretending I couldn't talk anymore. Yes, I started out intending to use these three brothers, but I was tired of lying to them. I wanted to be honest, and I wanted Callum to know that even if he was suspicious of us right now, I had no intention of harming him. I'd spent less time with him than Beck and Forrest, but that was because he'd been working so hard on this potion because he thought I was cursed.

I touched his cheek and pressed my lips to his. He was unyielding and didn't seem to want to kiss me anymore. I sighed and pulled away.

"Taron and I are the only sea creatures here. My people don't want war with yours, but they do intend to sink any ships that come back."

Callum offered me his hand and helped me to my feet.

"Beck, get the good wine. We're going to need it. Then, Kishi, it's time to tell us exactly what our father did and why you are here."

This was it. I had pretended not to be able to speak because I thought I would need more time to build up to this. Before I came here, I didn't care who got in my way. Things had changed. Land dwellers weren't totally awful, and I enjoyed their culture.

The druid king wouldn't send anyone important to my home. It would be people doing what he said because he was their king. We did the same thing on behalf of the mermaid council sometimes. They would come to our home to kill us for him, and we'd sink their ships.

I came here because I didn't want any more sea creatures to die. Now that I was here, I didn't think land-dwellers deserved to die because the druid king was crazy.

The only way to stop more death was to kill the druid king. I needed to be totally honest with his sons and hope they saw that.

CHAPTER 19

We all gathered on the couch, and I snuggled into Taron for support. Beck came back with food and several bottles. We had just eaten, but there was cheese and strange meat on the tray, and I wouldn't mind snacking on it while I tried to talk to them. Callum scowled when he saw the bottles.

"I said wine, Beck. I doubt they have whiskey in the ocean. You're going to get them drunk, and Kishi won't be able to finish her story."

"I'm not sure what whiskey is, but we get drunk in the ocean as well," I said. "You might not think I can handle whiskey, but you probably couldn't handle a seaweed cordial. I know my limits."

Beck started pouring his whiskey into glasses and glared at Callum.

"Bold of you to assume drunkenness is just a land thing."

"Sirens are miserable drunks. They start singing off-key and want everyone to tell them they are pretty."

Taron started giggling because the singing was just so *terrible,* and they kept doing it. Beck, Callum, and Forrest just gaped at us, and I realized sirens had murdered a lot of their people, and they probably didn't care about how they acted when they got drunk.

"Sorry," I said. "We all find what sirens do to land dwellers distasteful. We have a few that live with us that have turned their back on that. A shark will only bite a land dweller if they swim in their territory, but they take no pleasure in it like sirens do."

Beck cocked an eyebrow at us, then just exploded.

"Sorry, Callum. I get you have questions, and we need to know more, but how in the world is a mermaid mated to a shark? How do you have children? I can't picture the logistics."

"Seriously, Beck?" Callum snapped. "We have two potentially dangerous species here, and you want to know how they fuck?"

"That's offensive, Beck," Forrest said.

"No, it's okay. Taron and I aren't mated. We revere sharks, and they help protect us. Taron has always been a friend and looked out for my sister. This has all been quite new to him—me too, to be honest. I've never been on land before either. Mating is different for both of us in the ocean. I thought I was going to detest everything about land, but I like things here. Taron and I have been experimenting, but we don't know how to stop hatchlings like this or if our children could return to the sea. We've had *a lot* of fun even without mating."

"I love these two. I can help with that," Beck said.

"H-h-how?" Taron demanded.

"Stop!" Callum yelled. "Out with it, Kishi. Why are you here?"

"Your father sent a ship to my home during the lunar eclipse. None of you have any way of knowing this, but we are already in danger when that happens. We have ways of seeing at night, but they are useless during a lunar eclipse. Sea monsters come from the depths to hunt us. So we stay in our homes where we are safe. I was out late hunting and took shelter in one of the old sunken ships. I could *feel* the ship in the water. It was like it was scraping my flesh, even if I couldn't see it. My people felt it too."

Callum nodded like this made sense.

"A lot of species on land have magic related to the moon. A lot of druid magic relies on the power of the full moon. A lunar eclipse affects us here on land too. It wreaks havoc with the shifters. Sane druids avoid doing magic when it happens because of the negative energy. Even if you are clear with your intentions, it tends to go wrong.

"My father knows this, and so does my stepmother. They also know sacrificial magic has long been proven not to work. He probably sent the boat on the lunar eclipse for two reasons—the cover of darkness and the misguided belief that a sacrifice made during a lunar eclipse and harvesting the organs would give him what he wanted. Please tell me no one died."

I looked at him sadly. He knew people died. They found the wreckage of the ship. He meant *my* people.

"A lot of people died, Callum. Your people died too. My sister was a gentle soul. She used to love exploring the sunken ships near our home and speculating what it was like on land. I wasn't there. I should have been there to stop her. Instead, she felt the ship just like I did and snuck out.

"By the time I got there, the water was full of blood. Parts of my sister and Taron's family were floating to the ocean floor. The net wasn't in the water anymore. I swam to the surface and listened to them. I heard they mutilated my sister and several noble sharks by order of the druid king. So I called my people and we sunk the ship. And now I find out my sister, Taron's family, and all the land dwellers on that ship for nothing!"

Callum jumped to his feet and started pacing. He wasn't grilling me anymore. I guess he had heard enough.

"He's gone too far this time! The mermaids never did anything to him except asking to be left alone. They made it clear what would happen if we invaded their home. I've never met a shark before, and if I see one in the water, I get out. Taron has done nothing but try to protect Kishi since they got here. The men on that ship were probably lied to about why they needed to risk their lives and do what they did. Sorry, Kishi and Taron, but they wouldn't have questioned the sharks. No one on land would have mutilated a mermaid unless they had been manipulated, and my father is the master of that."

"I get that now," I said. "My people are setting patrols to sink any ships that come back. If your father tries this again, the people on the ships will die. The mermaid council is against coming to land to wage war now. Everyone loved my sister, but my parents weren't council members, and Seira wasn't a hunter. They all mourned her, but she wasn't important enough to them to risk exposing the secret we can go on land. If a mermaid they consider more important gets killed, that could change."

I was suddenly pulled into this massive druid hug. Taron was pretty touchy now that he had legs and didn't want to be left out. He wrapped his arms around Beck and rested his head on his shoulder.

"Your sister is just as important as any mermaid, Kishi," Beck said. "I'm not wild about the idea of being in the water with sharks, but I get there is a lot I don't understand about the ocean. I like Taron, and his family didn't deserve that."

Taron grunted and nuzzled Beck with his nose.

“We have to do something,” Forrest said. “He’s going to try again. We are all curious about mermaids and life under the sea. It makes sense mermaids like Kishi’s sister are curious about us too. More of them could risk it and swim into the nets. If sharks are their protectors, they could get caught too.”

“I agree,” Callum said. “This madness has to stop, and it’ll get worse if she dies. He’s going to lash out. If not the mermaids, he’ll start a war with someone else. We have to stop him.”

I pulled Callum down for a kiss. He kissed me back this time, and there was heat to it. I felt much better now that he was on my side again.

“I want to help, but I don’t want any of you to get into trouble. I think relations between land and sea would be much better with the three of you on the throne.”

“Callum is the eldest, so he would be king,” Forrest said.

“Why do the two of you kiss so freely?” Beck said.

“Do you not like it?” I asked. “We don’t have fins, so we can’t brush them against you to communicate in ways that don’t use words. Plus, you’re all very pretty, and I like you.”

Forrest started choking, and Callum pounded him on the back.

“I’m not complaining in the slightest,” Beck said. “The two of you can kiss me whenever you want.”

Taron took that as an open invitation and pulled Beck into a kiss. I just rolled my eyes. Callum and Forrest didn’t seem to care the two men were kissing. They didn’t even care that Taron was a shark and Beck was a druid. Beck didn’t care either and kissed him back. That was nice. That kind of thing wouldn’t fly in the ocean.

“We need to come up with a plan when you’re done kissing Taron,” Callum said.

“It’ll have to be for both of them,” Forrest said. “Our stepmother is universally disliked, and Callum is more than of age to rule, but she’ll attempt to insert herself as regent and make damned sure none of us take the throne.”

Beck pulled away from Taron and yanked us to the couch. I was in a big cuddle pile with the two of them, and it was seriously lovely.

“Whatever we do, it can’t tie back to us. He still has supporters,” Beck said.

“We can’t make our move until we are sure.”

“Use us,” Taron grunted.

His speech was getting so much better just from listening and learning. I was so proud of him. He growled at me when I bit his ear to show support.

“You aren’t going anywhere near him,” Callum said. “But you have an entire world of magic in the ocean that no one can trace here. We can use that. Let’s put our heads together.”

My plans seemed to change every day here. I had wanted to look him in the eye and tell him I was killing him for my sister and Taron’s family as I slid that dagger in his gut. I knew now the chances of Taron and I living through that were slim, even with the princes on our side. And I could end up implicating them.

Maybe I didn’t need to look him in the eye and be the one to kill him. I could have a hand in his death and be content in the knowledge it was done.

I’d make sure Callum’s really nice ass was firmly on the throne, then Taron and I could see if the ocean would welcome us back.

I knew I’d miss the brothers, and I’d miss Taron like this.

CHAPTER 20

We talked for hours. I was pretty sure I was drunk. Beck's whiskey was just as potent as seaweed cordial. Since I challenged him with it, Callum was insisting on trying it now. Beck and Forrest wanted to try it too. Taron thought they were insane, but sharks never could handle their liquor.

Taron was certainly enjoying that whiskey. I took it away from him because he appeared to be an affectionate drunk when he had legs. Then, Forrest left us to prepare dinner. He promised this time, he was going to prepare the best things land had to offer. I actually couldn't wait, and Beck said the food would make us a little less drunk. Frankly, I think he liked Taron was getting a little too friendly with him.

We still didn't have a plan, but we were having a lot of fun. I learned a lot about the druid king. They lived a long time on land, but he was still a relatively young king. He wasn't the one who made the arrangement with the mermaid council. He arranged a coup and seized the throne from that king.

Beck, Forrest, and Callum didn't know what happened to him, but their mother had been his queen. She was well loved among the people, and their father knew the best way to keep the throne was to force her to be his wife and give him many sons to secure his line.

Callum, Forrest, and Beck were close in age. Even Taron gasped when he heard how close. Mermaids, sirens, and sea witches reproduced when the family was ready to accept and raise a new hatchling. It was by choice. It was different for most other creatures in the ocean. Taron mated on instinct and would fight off other sharks, but it would never have happened as often as it did with their mother with the same female shark.

The druid king didn't stop with three sons either. I didn't know this about them, but they had sisters too. His madness didn't start with his second wife. He thought he needed an entire army of sons to secure his throne.

"Do females on land not fight?" I asked. "I'd like to fight whoever decided females needed to wear clothes like this."

Callum snorted.

"Women on land *do* fight. Druid women make fierce warriors. In some other kingdoms, they have queens running the show. My father claims she needs to be replaced because she is ineffective, but across the mountains lives a bear shifter queen he's actually terrified of. She's universally loved, but if you give her cause, she'll shift and rip you to shreds."

"Our father thinks women are only good for fucking and bearing children," Beck said. "Daughters to him would be worthless. Our mother was a powerful druid in her own right, but if she had killed him, our entire family would have been slaughtered. In the end, she died in childbirth because three

sons and four daughters weren't enough for him. He won't even look at my sisters, which is fine by them because they loathe him. It gives us ample time to train them."

Forrest came strolling in carrying a tray of food that smelled amazing.

"Topaz is going to beat the shit out of all three of us if he goes down and she's not involved. When she sleeps, she dreams up subplots that involve murdering both of them. She probably already has a working idea on how we could do it if she had support and manpower."

"Absolutely not!" Callum said. "If we tell Topaz we're going to take him out, she'll walk up to him in front of everyone and slit his throat."

"I've never met her, but I like your sister," I said.

"Sit and eat. Whether we kill him or expose him and have him thrown in jail, we're doing it in a way that none of us takes the fall for it. He's the criminal here. None of us are dying for stopping him from murdering more people and possibly starting wars," Forrest said.

I wanted the druid king dead, not in jail. It was the only thing I would accept after what happened in my home. We didn't do jails in the oceans, but they explained the concept to me. I'd been listening to everything they said from the start.

Their father put on one face at home and another in public. Many of his subjects loved him because of the farce he put out about cracking down on crime to hide his sacrifices. Dead meant this was over, and my druid princes were safe. No one would be coming back to my home with nets, killing my people for magic that didn't work.

Jail meant the possibility of escape. I thought the druid king was a total idiot if he thought women weren't perfectly capable of beating his ass, but he had supporters. They could break him out and come for my princes. I needed him dead, but they still needed time to come to that conclusion. I put it aside and focused on dinner. It smelled amazing.

"What did you cook this time?"

Taron touched this massive brown thing and licked his finger. I swatted at his arm. I wanted to do that too, but I was coming to realize they didn't do that on land.

"It's okay, Kishi," Forrest said. "Let him. This is mutton from one of the wolf packs. They shift and go hunting, then bring it back to sell. They have the best meat in the entire kingdom. This is also the alpha's mate's famous recipe. She only gave it to us after Callum brewed her a fertility potion, and she had a whole litter of pups. It's a top-secret recipe."

"What is a litter of pups?" I asked.

"Werewolf babies," Beck said. "They consider it a blessed birth when there is more than one."

"Same with mermaids and sharks. Taron keeps complaining that land-dwellers only get one cock."

Beck and Forrest fell out laughing.

"Is that why he got upset about the werewolf joke?" Forrest wheezed.

Callum just scowled.

"That joke is obscene. No one needed to hear it."

"They were both laughing at everything else. How the fuck were we supposed to know?" Forrest said.

"Everyone just needs to focus on this delicious meal instead of filthy jokes. It's not every day we get to serve a mermaid and a shark top-secret shifter recipes."

I really wanted to hear that joke, but I knew Taron was dealing with some things about his lack of a second cock, so I didn't press the issues. Forrest brought out a large knife and started slicing the mutton. It smelled delicious, and I really wanted to try it, but Forrest hardly put any on my plate. I

cleared my throat.

"Swimming takes a lot of energy, and I'm one of my people's best hunters. So I eat *way* more than that, my druid prince."

Forrest just laughed and gave me a much bigger slice.

"Duly noted. I also picked up a pie from the best succubus baker in town. She puts love in everything she bakes. Literally. I believe you liberated one from Chloe and her beach romp."

"We had no idea what it was when we ate it, but it was quite delicious. Taron ate the fish, but what did you do to it? It was so shriveled and dry? All the seafood you've served me so far has been delicious, but it looked wholly unappealing."

"It was smoked and dried," Callum said. "It makes the fish last longer on land before it spoils. It also travels better than the fish you enjoyed. They do it to other meats too. They bring it on long journeys when hunting could be sparse. It's not terrible, but I could see how it would be unappealing to a mermaid."

Taron just shrugged.

"Not bad."

"Taron was mad the bones were hard. I would have been too if I had tried it. Some of the most delicious parts of a fish are in the head. This mutton is delicious. You should get more werewolves pregnant."

Callum started choking and downed his wine in one gulp. Forrest and Beck started giggling.

"Beck probably has the old-fashioned way," Forrest said.

"Shut up, Forrest. I'm meticulous about birth control spells. If anyone says different, they are lying."

"I want that spell," I said.

"I'd be happy to participate in your land experimentations by giving it to you after dinner," Beck smirked.

"Beck stays," Taron said.

I *was not* expecting Taron to invite Beck to bed with us. Well, not totally. Taron had latched on to Beck in more ways than just the kissing and touching. He watched his every move and was trying to learn from him. Of course, the three brothers were all different, and they liked to give Beck a hard time, but really, any one of them would have been an excellent choice for Taron.

"Fuck, yes! I'd be happy to participate in any way you want."

"Seriously, Beck?" Callum growled. "You aren't having a threesome with a mermaid and a shark."

"You're just jealous you didn't get invited."

"I want him to experiment with us," I said. "It means a lot to Taron, and Beck is pretty. I like Beck. I like the two of you too, but Taron hasn't invited you yet, and he's a little possessive now that he has legs."

Callum started choking again, and Forrest went straight for his wine.

"Did it just get hot in here?" Forrest asked.

"You're chewing your food like a shifter with dental problems, Callum," Beck said.

"She just suggested an orgy like it was nothing!"

"It's not. If you set up your potions and crystals ahead of time and went to hang out with the shifters during the full moon, you'd know they are totally normal and a ton of fun."

"Beck! Druids don't do that! It's a shifter thing."

"Wait, you don't go?" Forrest asked. "I don't brag about it like Beck does, but shifter moon orgies

are a blast. They spit roast a pig and break out their best moonshine. Everyone gets naked, and it's this big love fest. They *always* invite us. You've never been even once, Callum?"

"I knew you had it in you, big brother!" Beck said, clapping Forrest on the back. "Seriously, Callum? Not even once?"

Callum looked so offended his brothers were bothered about his lack of sex life. No one was *forcing* him to experiment with us. He was pretty, and I wouldn't say no if everyone were on board with it, but I didn't want him in my bed against his will.

"It wasn't because I didn't want to or because I wasn't curious. I would have loved to let loose with the shifters. If Father saw me setting out potions and crystals early instead of working under the moon, he would have gotten paranoid and had me followed. He would have arrested an entire wolf pack on trumped-up charges and had them killed because he's a purist that thinks species shouldn't mix."

The more I learned about their father, the more I hated him. I was having fun with Taron and wanted to mix with the brothers too. I didn't find a single thing wrong with it.

"I get it. If Taron decides to invite you to a mermaid orgy, you should definitely say yes. Now, get the fuck out of here. Dinner is over, and I have a date."

"We need to be figuring out how to take care of our father, not having threesomes, Beck."

"Get out. I'm big on pillow talk and snuggling. I get my bests ideas post-coitus."

Taron wasn't remotely interested in this argument. He stood up and grabbed my hand and Becks.

"Threesome," he grunted.

Okay, then. I was pretty sure Callum had a few more arguments about why we needed to talk more about his father, but Taron was just done listening. I knew we needed to talk about it, and so did Taron. We'd talked all day and still didn't have an answer. We could pick it up in the morning after everyone had slept.

Taron always had the best ideas when he was a shark, and it was no different on land.

CHAPTER 21

Taron and Beck were naked before they shut the door. I was still standing there in this dress, wondering why they did this to women on land. I'd like to be naked right now too, but it was much easier for men to remove their clothes than it was for women. I'll bet they could breathe a lot easier too.

I stuck my hands on my hips and glared at them. The two of them looked amazing naked, and I wanted to lick them, but I needed to know what the actual point was with these restricting clothes.

"I get that all of you on land feel the need to cover your bodies for some reason, but I don't understand why you force women to wear these clothes."

Beck chuckled and moved to help me with my laces.

"No one is forcing anyone. Even before I knew you were a mermaid, I had the tailor go with the least complicated and less restrictive options. If you don't like these dresses, you'd hate what they wear in the palace. Topaz likes the most ostentatious dresses possible because it pisses my stepmother off."

"Why would uncomfortable clothes make your stepmother angry?"

"Topaz is considered a great beauty. She looks exactly like my mother. My stepmother had every trace of my mother removed from the palace when she married my father, but she couldn't get rid of my sisters. Topaz is a powerful druid, and we taught her in secret, but she thinks we can't make a move on either of them. So she's been passive-aggressively taunting our stepmother by making sure everyone fawns over her beauty in her presence. It's pretty precious. If she were an oyster, she'd be making so many pearls sitting there listening to it."

I nodded and laughed. *That* I understood.

"These awful dresses can be used for psychological warfare. Maybe they aren't so bad."

Beck's lips brushed my shoulder, and I broke into goosebumps.

"Taron, get over here. She *hates* this dress. We need to take it off, and it's sexier if we both do it."

It certainly was. Beck had done this before. Taron was watching him and learning. They didn't remove a single piece of clothing without leaving kisses behind. Sometimes, they would lean over my shoulder and kiss each other with me smashed between them.

Being with Taron alone was amazing, and I wanted to do it again. Beck and Taron together were fantastic. I didn't think they would be into kissing Taron, but they seemed to like kissing me. Maybe I could talk Taron into invited Forrest and Callum. If two men felt this good, I would imagine four would be even better.

Beck stepped back.

"Okay, the first rule about having sex with me. Birth control magic. If I didn't know you were a

mermaid and didn't have it, I'd scan you for it. If it weren't there, I'd offer it. If you weren't a druid, you might argue about moonstones, herbs, and various other methods I don't know for certain work like this spell. Finally, we might agree to end our night and go separate ways, or you might allow me to make damned sure you don't get pregnant, and my father kills you both, and we have a lot of fun."

"Too many words," Taron growled.

"Taron is right, Beck. What was that? I already asked you for the spell."

Beck cleared his throat and mopped his hand down his face.

"I have a certain top-secret reputation here on land. The shifters fight over who gets to invite me to their moon parties. If I go to one or bring someone here, I make sure they have a really fucking good time, even if we don't actually have sex. It's not just the danger from my father that people aren't going around blabbing I don't just stick to druid women.

"I'm cautious, so he never finds out and punishes someone, but I'm also nice to people. It's the right thing to do, but I'm *super* nervous about this. I'm guessing mermaids and sharks do things differently than we do on land. It's like I have to make this *really* good because you've never done this before."

I touched Beck's cheek, and Taron went up behind him to nuzzle his neck. He was just so sweet, and Taron and I wanted to do this because we *wanted* it to be different.

"If this were the ocean, Taron would be fighting you over who got to mate with me instead of inviting you. It's the same with mermaids. I'd have to smack you around with my tail for ages until you proved you were worthy of mating with me. We can beat you up if you want, but we don't actually want to now that we have legs. I'd like to lick you, and I think Taron wants to kiss you again."

"I was trained to fight with weapons and magic, but I'd rather get on with the licking and kissing part."

"Good. Taron?"

I didn't even have to tell him. Taron picked up Beck and flung him on the bed. We might not want to fight Beck, but he would be prey to us in the water. Neither of us wanted to hurt him in a bad way, but we certainly wanted to play with him. Beck was laughing when we pounced on him.

"I adore how friendly the two of you are, considering everyone on land is scared shitless of sharks, and you beat up mermen for sex."

"Most mermen have egos the size of all the oceans combined. The three of you are princes, but you don't. And you're very pretty," I said, biting his nipple.

Beck groaned and pulled my hair.

"The two of you are gorgeous. There are people on land that look similar to Taron, but I've never seen a single person on land with dark skin, white hair, and eyes that shade of blue on land like Kishi. My father has entertained people from many different kingdoms. He's tried to marry me off to some seriously ugly princesses to make alliances with kings who don't like him. I'd love to show you around this kingdom and show you off, but I can't while my father is still king."

I kissed my way down to Beck's cock while Taron nibbled on his ear.

"I wouldn't mind wearing uncomfortable dresses if it bothered your stepmother, but I really don't want to talk anymore."

"Yes. Shut up," Taron grunted.

"Fine. I get you two are predators in the water, but I'm a druid, and I *do not* just lay here while I have a beautiful woman and a sexy man in my bed."

Beck flipped me over and had me pinned on my back in an instant. I wasn't even mad, and neither

was Taron. Taron just went with the flow and kissed me. He was so good at that, considering sharks never did it. Beck was petting my thighs, and I was just so excited for this.

"How far have you two gone with your experimentations? I have an idea."

"We used our mouths," I said. "It's a definite perk to having legs because no one does that in the ocean. It was just instinct, and it ended up feeling wonderful. If you haven't figured that out on land yet, you should definitely try it."

Beck chuckled.

"We use mouths, fingers, and there's this shop on the outskirts of town run by a married incubus and succubus that sells the most wonderful handmade sex toys. They are honestly probably richer than my father at this point, and he doesn't even know it."

I was intrigued. We had plenty of toys and games in the ocean. They weren't just for the hatchlings, and I enjoyed plenty of them once I became an adult. Unfortunately, there was not a single species in the ocean that made toys specifically for mating.

"I want to see a sex toy!" I demanded.

Taron was still kissing my neck, but he managed to get out that he wanted them too. Sharks didn't play with toys, but they adored games, and there were plenty Taron played with Seira and me.

Beck was out of bed in seconds. He didn't even leave the bedroom. I hadn't really snooped around his house, even though I probably should have, considering who his father was. I guess I could just tell I could trust them. Even if Beck did just pull an entire locked chest over to the bed and unlock it with the key around his neck.

"Let's see. I've got butt stuff, dildos, and restraints. I *usually* use the paddles and floggers on people who are into that. Something tells me the two of you would prefer spanking my ass with them instead of being spanked. We shouldn't break these out just yet. You asked, so I showed you. I have a better idea."

I usually loathed being told what to do, but Beck was clearly wise regarding land sex and threesomes. If clans were fighting over who got to invite him to one, I wasn't too proud to bow to his superior knowledge on the subject.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Taron, stop kissing Kishi for a minute. Let's take a break. I get that all this feels good, but it can also be painful if done wrong. I never want you to be hurt, Kishi. We are going to take things slow, but I promise you will both have an excellent time."

"I trust you, Beck."

"Taron not hurt Kishi."

"Good. Now, lay down."

Land was so weird. If Beck were a merman, I would have fought him until he managed to overpower me and made me do what he asked. I didn't want to do that. I happily laid on my back and yanked Taron down for a kiss.

"Kishi, take Taron in your mouth," Beck commanded.

Beck was being super bossy, but neither Taron nor myself felt the need to assert dominance. My heart was racing with excitement over the possibilities of where this night might lead. We were both happy to let Beck guide our night, but now that Beck had put it in Taron's head he could hurt me, he hesitated. I touched his chest.

"It's fine, Taron. We did this last night. I might not have my tail, but I can still beat your ass across the room if things go too far."

"I'm the orgy police," Beck said. "I'm all about safety in all sexual situations. You won't hurt her,

Taron. Kishi will let you know if it's painful, and you'll adjust. If you don't, she's perfectly capable of kicking your ass. If she doesn't, I will."

The possibility of both of us beating him to a pulp seemed to snap Taron out of it. It was in Taron's nature to fight back if Beck came at him, but he wouldn't lift a finger if it were me. We both knew that even if Beck didn't. Taron's eyes went hooded, and he ran his fingers through my hair, but he didn't give me what I wanted.

He still complied when I grabbed his perky ass and hauled his hips over to me. Taron groaned when I took him down my throat. I was still getting the hang of this and was a little messy at it, but Taron seemed to enjoy it, and I was nothing but enthusiastic about it.

Beck sprung into action and used his mouth like Taron did, but quite differently. Beck took his time like he could do this all night. I kind of wanted to see what happened if he did, but by the time Taron and I were done, I felt like a jellyfish. We eventually stopped to sleep.

Taron wasn't the only one of us who could learn from Beck. I knew Beck wanted to show us a good time, and Taron wanted to please me, but I wanted to be good at this too. I didn't have to worry about fighting with either of them. It was all about pleasure, and I didn't want to be selfish.

Maybe Taron would like it if I slowed things down a bit. Beck had a reputation for this. He wouldn't do this without reason. I was less frenzied than before. I slowed down and let the pleasure Beck was giving me guide me.

It was pretty much amazing. Finally, I found a manageable rhythm, and Taron seemed to enjoy it. His moans joined my muffled cries. I used to loathe having my hair pulled when I was younger, but when Taron tangled his hands in my hair and pulled a little, it only heightened the pleasure Beck was giving me.

Beck was good at this. So was Taron. They were just different. Beck slowly increased the pressure and speed of his tongue until I was panting. He slid two fingers inside me, and I let out this huge moan. I involuntarily squeezed Taron's cock and started working him with my hand and mouth simultaneously.

Beck twisted his fingers and did something that had me bucking on the bed and seeing an entire night's sky of stars. When I finally calmed down, Beck and Taron looked so content, and I was the only one who finished. I felt like I could barely sit up, and I was a little dizzy, but I wanted to change that. So I reached for Taron again, and Beck grabbed my hands to put them on my stomach.

"Hands off, little mermaid. We're not done with you yet. It's generally polite on land to make sure your woman is taken care of in all things before you do anything for yourself. Shall we proceed? What I have in mind should mean a lot to Taron."

I jumped up and kissed Beck. He was unlike any merman I'd ever met. Even if one of them had agreed to something like this, they wouldn't give a shit about the other male involved. This was as just as new to Taron as it was to me. Beck could have muscled his way in and tried to leave him out, but he hadn't.

"It means a lot to me you are making this special for him too. What did you have in mind?"

Beck grabbed Taron's hand and pulled him over to him. He gave him a passionate kiss and then pulled away to smile at me.

"It's safe to mate with Kishi now, Taron. I think you should."

Beck had to be some sort of special druid with a reputation for sex. I understood this wasn't the ocean, and he didn't need to establish dominance by fighting Taron, but I knew this felt good. Beck was just *telling* Taron to do it, and it looked like he had no intention of fighting him for it.

Land was so strange sometimes.

I wanted this more than anything, and it *should* be Taron the first time I did this on land. Still, I wasn't totally selfish. I could be about a lot of things, but not about this. In the ocean, if you couldn't keep up, no one invited you to play games. They excluded you until you learned to keep up. Then, you either learned or something with teeth ate you.

Taron invited Beck to this game, and we both knew damned well he could not only keep up, he probably knew how to play it way better than we did. I knew Beck was doing everything to make sure this was special for Taron and me since we had never done this on land before, but there was no reason we had to leave him out of it. Not when he showed me the most delicious idea earlier.

"Together," I said, grabbing Beck's hand. "I want you in my mouth."

I saw some of Beck's ego poke through when his smirk came back. There was also this look in his eyes like he wasn't expecting me to say that, but it meant a lot to him I did. There was also this heat there like he really wanted it.

"Get on all fours, Kishi. I know multiple women that swear by that position, and it'll make what you want to do more comfortable. It'll feel amazing for both of you."

It was such a strange request. If a merman had bested me and suggested something like that, I would have made him regret it. Still, Beck said women on land enjoyed this, and I didn't get this vibe he was lying about that. So I did what he asked and was excited about the possibilities.

Beck slid in front of me, and I felt the bed move as Taron got behind me. Mermaids didn't go anywhere near the area when sharks were mating, but Taron usually came back and described everything in pretty graphic detail.

Sharks weren't taught anything about mating. They weren't given anything that would give them a leg up if a fertile female showed up. They didn't care about friendship or family. They'd fight each other for mating rights.

Everything was instinctual. He seemed to be operating the same on land without having Beck spell out every minute detail. Taron grabbed my hip and gently guided himself inside me. I groaned because it pretty much felt fantastic.

"Fuck, Taron. Just the one feels amazing."

"Are you okay?"

"Better than okay. Shit, that feels so good."

"I know," Taron groaned out loud.

"Come here, Beck," I growled, wrapping my hand around his cock.

Taron started thrusting, and I took Beck deep into my mouth. Then, I started working him with my hand and mouth. That seemed to be easier, and men liked it better. I liked this. No, I *loved* it. We were all together getting pleasure. No one was left out. It was beautiful.

"Lean forward and rub her clit, Taron," Beck moaned.

I honestly had no idea what that was, but Taron sure did. Beck didn't even need to give him more instructions. He never stopped his thrusts and leaned forward to rub that spot they both had licked. Was that what it was called? I'd like to have it licked and touched a lot more.

My pleasure increased tenfold, and I started to slam back against Taron. I wanted more of him. I heard Taron chuckle, and he gave it to me harder. Beck tangled his hands in my hair and guided me faster on his cock.

We were all getting a little out of control, and I was totally fine with that. Don't ask me what got into Taron. Beck didn't tell him to do this, and I didn't ask him to. He let out a huge growl and brought his hand down on my ass. He struck me!

I wasn't expecting him to, nor was I expecting the sting to shoot me totally over the edge. My

shriek was muffled by Beck's cock, and my belly warmed as I felt Taron let go. Taron threw back his head and let out this enormous roar. Beck tried to move me off his cock.

"Shit, that's hot. I'm about to cum, Kishi. You might want to move."

I wasn't about to move. Taron surprised me last night when he filled my mouth, but I swallowed it because it was a part of him. It didn't taste horrible, and I wanted to taste Beck too. So I doubled my efforts until he let out this huge moan, and I had swallowed every drop.

Beck yanked me to his chest, and Taron nestled into my back.

"Holy shit," Beck said with his hand on his forehead. "That was amazing."

I nibbled on his neck, but I was completely and utterly ready to sleep.

"Thank you, Beck. You made it special, and it felt amazing."

Beck let out a chuckle.

"I wouldn't go there and risk you not liking it and killing me, but Taron did. I had a feeling you'd be into a little spanky spank."

Taron let out a growl that sounded like nothing but pride and bit my ear. I could barely keep my eyes open and couldn't suppress a yawn. It was so lovely sleeping between the two of them.

"We can explore that later. I feel like a jellyfish, and I'm exhausted."

Beck kissed my forehead and snuggled in closer. Taron just spanked me again. We clearly unleashed a monster now that he knew I liked it.

I wasn't even mad about it.

CHAPTER 22

I would have loved to have stayed in bed all day with Beck and Taron, but this wasn't what I came to land for, even if it was a lot of fun. They were on our side, and this was going way better than I had ever hoped. I considered them friends. Beck was now a lover, and I wouldn't mind experimenting with Forrest and Callum either.

Forrest was waiting with breakfast when we got out of bed, but Callum was missing. They had been watching us and learning, but Taron and I had been watching them too. Callum was the eldest. He hadn't said it outright, but I saw him. He was the responsible one and dealt with the brunt of his father's rage and paranoia, so Forrest and Beck didn't have to.

I didn't have to ask. He was doing that now because Beck spent the night with us, and Forrest left to cook for us. We didn't need a mad king getting any wind that there were actual plots against him, and his sons were involved. I was fairly certain he was like an otter and saw wild conspiracy theories in everything.

I didn't want that for Callum. He deserved to have fun and to go to all the shifter orgies he wanted to. I didn't think Forrest and Beck even realized he put himself in their father's line of sight so they could have more freedom. If they had known, they wouldn't have given him such a hard time when Taron invited Beck to our bed.

I had a feeling Callum could get just as filthy as Beck and Forrest if he weren't worried about his father.

"How long will Callum be hatchling sitting your father?" I asked.

"He's gathering intel," Forrest said. "Our stepmother isn't doing well. There's another treatment that doesn't involve cutting her breasts off that would increase her chances of surviving, but she's refusing that too because her hair would fall out. Our kingdom boasts some of the best wigmakers in the entire world. We've been known to trade wigs with other kingdoms they are that good. She still refused. He knows the ship sank, so he'll be plotting something as equally awful. Callum is trying to find out."

I wrinkled my nose. I *did not* like their stepmother, but I also had no idea what a wig was. Whatever it was, it was probably way less unpleasant than slowly dying. Or murdering innocent people trying to do magic every druid knew didn't work.

"Okay, what the fuck is a wig?" I demanded.

"It's hair. It's worn on your head. People wear them for loads of reasons, not just because they've lost theirs. Some hairstyles people like to wear are complicated. There's a lot of pulling to get it that way and a lot of washing and brushing to take it out. On the other hand, if you do it to a wig, you just slip it on and pin it. You can also change hair color whenever you want and change it back in an

instant."

"I liked it when Beck and Taron pulled my hair."

"Liked spanking too," Taron said, puffing up his chest.

He was so fucking proud of that.

Forrest started coughing and glared at Beck.

"You brought out the kink the first time?"

Beck plastered this innocent look on his face and fluttered his eyelashes.

"I never kiss and tell."

"It was lovely," I said. "If Taron doesn't try to kill you, you should join us, Forrest."

Taron looked intrigued by the idea, but Forrest turned a lovely shade of purple like I embarrassed him. I wasn't sure why because, according to him, he did this when the moon was full.

"You're quite forward in the ocean. Way more than the shifters."

"I think it's refreshing," Beck said.

"My people are taking the patrols seriously. It wouldn't shock me if they sent an emissary out to places you don't have similar arrangements with. We are all territorial, but some mermaids consider your ships as just seeking passage. They only sink them if they lower nets in the water. If word spreads among the mermaids and sharks, everyone will be on patrol about what that ship did in my home. You won't just have to worry about the sirens. If he tries again or sends other boats, they may be in danger."

Since when did I care about land dweller ships sinking? I used to not care in the slightest. It was them or us. It didn't have to be. I understood more now. The brothers explained they used their ships to trade with other kingdoms. I might not understand wigs, but I understood trade. We did that in the ocean too.

Callum interrupted us by storming into the dining room, followed by an absolutely lovely girl who looked just like him. He looked to be in a rotten mood, and she raised an eyebrow when she saw us.

"Sister?" Taron asked.

"What are you doing here, Topaz?" Beck demanded.

Forrest and Beck also seemed angry she was here, but I had a feeling she was a friend. She wanted to kill the druid king too. I had a feeling I'd like her.

"This sneaky motherfucker was asking a lot of questions. I *know* you're plotting something. Who is this? Or should I say, *what* are they?"

"Go home, Topaz," Forrest said.

"No. And fuck you. Callum was stroking Father's ego. He only does that when he's up to something. I want in."

I liked her.

"You said she already has ideas. She could help," I said.

"I don't recognize your accent."

"And you aren't going to."

Taron stomped over and made a big show of sniffing her. He leaned forward and licked her cheek.

"Trust her," he grunted.

Topaz wiped Taron's spit off her face and punched him right in the stomach.

"What was that? He doesn't feel like a shifter."

I really liked her.

I grabbed Taron's arm and guided him back over to me so we could snuggle. We really didn't need Taron killing their sister.

“He’s a shifter you’ve never met before.”

“Beck’s new girlfriend said to let me in on it before her friend licked me.”

“It’s three against three,” I pointed out. “Taron and I think she can help, and so does she.”

Before anyone could argue, there was a knock on their door. Everyone looked around in a panic.

“Were you followed?” Beck hissed.

“No! I was careful, and I made sure Topaz was too.”

Someone knocked a little harder.

“Go get the door. Kishi and Taron need to go hide in the bedroom just in case. Topaz too. We don’t need her going down with us.”

Topaz marched towards the bedroom and grabbed our hands to drag us behind her. I was worried. My heart was pounding in my ears. I thought we were untouchable here. The druid king wasn’t supposed to know about this place.

“Relax. It’s probably one of Beck’s *other* girlfriends. It’s best if she doesn’t see you. Depending on what she is, she might get jealous. Follow me,” Topaz said.

We filed into the bedroom, and Topaz left the door opened a crack so we could spy. Beck came in, followed by three massive men. He looked worried.

“Who is that?” I whispered.

“I have no idea. They aren’t from our kingdom, and like you, I have no idea what they are.”

Oh, shit.

CHAPTER 23

There were three gigantic men in the living room that were as equally large as Taron and the druid brothers. Topaz and her brothers didn't seem to know who or what they were either. I went to my bag and pulled the enchanted abalone dagger out. Taron cracked his knuckles and crowded behind me. Topaz tried to pull us away from the door. Maybe I was stupid, but there was just something about them that said they weren't our enemy.

The three brothers shook their hands, and magic crackled at their fingertips. A very pretty man with long hair and a beard just held up his hand.

"Please, put that out. We aren't here to hurt you. I'm Salem."

An olive skinned man looked right at the door we were hiding behind.

"Perhaps you can ask the little mermaid, druid princess, and shark to come out and join us? I'm Adamo."

The large man with black hair looked like he was about to say something, but I flew out of the bedroom. How did he know what Taron and I were when no one else here did? He let me slam him against the wall and press the blade to his throat. His friends didn't even try to stop me. Taron came charging out and looked like he didn't know who he wanted to pulverize first.

"How do you know what we are?" I demanded.

Adamo just smirked at me.

"I dated a mermaid once, and Salem has studied all forms of magic. He apprenticed with a sea witch for a few decades. Sharks aren't the only ones capable of coming on land. He would have stayed longer, but she decided to fall in love with him, and he doesn't date."

I pulled the knife away and settled down. That was enough for Taron and me, but the four druids in the room were still suspicious.

"Why are you here?" Callum demanded. "And what are you?"

"We've been here a while. We've just stayed out of sight. I'm Tristan. We're here about your father. We know you aren't like him."

"That's because we're not insane. Are you hungry?" Topaz asked.

"Topaz, you can't befriend the first person who shows up and says our father is a psychopath!" Forrest snapped.

"Shut up! You've been keeping a mermaid in here, and you didn't even tell me. You know I've always loved them. You didn't even tell me when I saw her. I'm not even sure how you've got a shark in here, but he's quite handsome."

I bared my teeth at Topaz. Maybe I was just as jealous as Taron. I liked her, but Taron was *mine*. Taron walked over and made a big show of kissing me. There were other ways of asserting

dominance besides spilling blood.

"It's a spell," Salem said. "Different from druid magic, but magic all the same. Your father sent a ship to their home and broke the accords with the mermaids. Mermaids defect and come to land rarely, but it does happen. Sharks only do for a reason."

"And it's revenge," Tristan said. "I can feel wrath coming off both of them, but it's justified. Your father took something from them. We're here to help."

I didn't know who these three were or how they knew all that, but if they wanted to help us kill the druid king, I was all for it. They were just a pretty as the druid brothers, but I didn't really find myself wanting to kiss them.

"You can't know that," Callum said. "We've been cautious. My father kept that ship's destination top secret. We didn't even know until we came across Kishi and Taron. Even after the wreckage reached shore, he's lying and saying it was sent for trade but got caught up in a storm."

"You can't know what they are feeling either," Beck said. "Only an incubus or succubus can do that, and I can tell none of you are that."

"Please don't attempt to explain our gifts to us. We are much older than anything in this room. This kingdom was forest and sand when we were born. The palace you live in and the concepts of kings hadn't even been born yet. They created us for a specific purpose. You've heard of us, but probably only as an abstract concept used to frighten you into behaving. Why don't we get comfortable with a few drinks? We'll tell you exactly what we are and come up with a plan to get Callum on the throne before war destroys this entire kingdom."

Taron and I went straight to the couch. I grabbed Beck's hand on the way and pulled him down with us so we could all snuggle. Topaz must have been here before because she knew exactly where Beck kept his whiskey and wine. Callum and Forrest were still standing there scowling like they wanted to fight.

"Just hear them out. You trusted Taron and me, and we gave you every reason not to. You didn't know what we were either, and we'd never been on land before. We were a lot stranger than these three, and none of them have tried to stab you like Taron did. You didn't think we could be a mermaid or a shark. They could be friends who found out what your father has been up to and want to avoid innocent people dying."

Forrest looked at Callum and shrugged.

"We didn't have any ideas, and any idea Topaz had is going to result in all of us being hanged. So it won't hurt to hear them out."

"Fine. But if I don't like what they have to say, I'm having them arrested," Callum snapped.

"Stop being stupid," Beck said. "They said they are here to plant your butt on the throne and keep your subjects from dying. You'd have to be an idiot not to hear them out. They knew what Kishi and Taron were without us having to tell them. They clearly know things we don't."

Topaz slammed two bottles on the table and sat close to Beck.

"Like how to get rid of him and our step monster for good without all of us going down with him."

"I don't understand," I said. "You told me your father overthrew the previous king, stole his wife, and everyone loved him. Asserting dominance is the way in the ocean. My home isn't a monarchy, but if a prince or princess killed the king or queen to stop a war, they'd be celebrated. So why would your people kill you for doing the same thing he did to the previous king? I'm sure everyone here loves you if they invite you to their orgies and keep it a secret from your father. Don't you have trials here where you can testify to his crimes? Taron might not be able to, but I'd be happy to tell everyone what he did in the ocean."

Adamo chuckled.

"I love mermaids who aren't totally used to land just yet."

"Did your girlfriend eventually go back to the ocean?" Beck asked.

"She's still on land. We have to travel a lot because of what we are. She got tired of me leaving her alone for long periods of time. So she broke up with me. She's happily married to a bear shifter who lives right next to the ocean. There's a forest on one side for him to shift and do bear things, and she's got the ocean to play in. When I'm in the area, I visit them. She's still lovely, even if she insists on eating entire fish raw."

That was interesting. Talora told us mermaids went to land, but I'd only ever heard of the one since I got here, and she had gone back to the ocean. But, I had to admit, there were things I liked here.

"How does she deal with the pain when she gets back in the water?" I asked. "I didn't know it was like that when Beck suggested a bath. It was how he found out I was a mermaid."

"It's a rite of passage, little mermaid—a test to see where you truly want to be. After a while, the change is painless. You'll still have to dry out and peel your tail off to get legs, and it will always itch, but going back in the water doesn't have to be painful. A lot of mermaids lack the patience to figure out they can have both. They can't deal with the pain, but the call of the ocean is too strong. They end up going home. She dealt with the pain because she loved me, even though I hated her being in pain. She was so excited the day it stopped."

Interesting. I didn't know how to process that, so I filed it away to think about it later.

"If no one else has any more questions about mermaids, I have about a million about who these guys are and how they know what they know," Callum said.

Adamo leaned forward and smirked,

"We're three of the Seven Deadly Sins. Just the ones your father and stepmother have committed. We're here to punish them and avoid innocent lives lost. We have an idea, but we need your help. We've already observed you and know you aren't like him."

What the fuck? I'd heard of the Seven Deadly Sins, even in the depths of the ocean. Mermaids didn't put much stock in them. I know I didn't. It was the sea witches who liked to threaten everyone in the ocean with the concept of sin.

I thought they were just trying to scare people. Sea witches got off on that. Aside from Talora, they really just enjoyed messing with your head. Unless I had been wrong about them this entire time. Taron wouldn't be here with me if it weren't for a sea witch. She had helped both of us. And apparently, one had helped Salem. He made an impression, and now every sea witch in the ocean talked about these men, even if they didn't explain they came in person to punish people.

Forrest, Beck, and Callum looked like they were still processing, but I just knew these men had the answers to everything.

CHAPTER 24

I had a million questions, but I knew it wasn't appropriate to ask them until everything had been fully explained. Adamo had dated a mermaid who stayed on land, and Salem studied magic with a sea witch. That was flat out amazing to me because they were very secretive about their magic. Talora liked me, and she'd been nothing but helpful about sending us to land. She absolutely adored Seira, but she certainly wouldn't have taught either of us her magic, even if we begged.

I believed them totally, but Callum and Forrest weren't quite there yet. Beck and Topaz were totally on board with this. Beck didn't care what Sin they were. He just thought it was amazing they existed as actual people. Topaz wanted to know exactly how they planned to take out her father and stepmother.

"I'm confused. If the Seven Deadly Sins are actual people and you travel around punishing people, how come no one knows this? Most everyone is taught you'll be punished in the afterlife when you meet the final death. It's used to scare people into behaving," Callum said.

"If there are seven of you, I'm shocked we didn't get the whole lot for this," Beck said. "He's a hedonist, and he doesn't exactly rein it in. He's just good at hiding it from his subjects. I'm guessing you can feel that, though."

"Tristan is Wrath, and Adamo is Greed. I'm Sloth. Your father commits a lot of Sloth, but I'm mostly here because he's a druid, and I'm the magic expert on our team."

Topaz frowned.

"I don't get it. How has he committed Sloth? He's literally always plotting something horrible. He's a horrible person, but he's not lazy."

"My sin has gotten a bit twisted up as centuries have passed. It's not laziness. Everyone deserves their downtime and a day to do nothing every once in a while. Sloth is the complete rejection of anything good and only indulging in the bad things. Your father seems to be doing nothing but that lately. His intentions were good when he seized the throne, but power quickly went to his head. He's doing terrible things now. Things he needs to pay for, but he's doing them to save his wife. That's where Tristan and Adamo come in."

"There are several ways he could have saved her without resorting to forbidden magic that has long been proven not to work," Beck snapped.

"Oh, I'm aware," Salem said. "Who do you think was the one that made sure sacrifices were outlawed and proven ineffective? It took my knowledge of magic and all seven of us working with every single druid leader in the world. It took some time, but eventually, everyone admitted it didn't work and didn't want to risk punishment. This was quite a long time ago, but we made damned sure

the lessons passed down were pretty clear it doesn't matter what the moon is doing. Killing an innocent isn't going to do a damned thing magically."

"If he *really* loved her, he would have talked her into the surgery. If she still refused, he could have brought in several of our famous wig makers and convinced her to do the nonsurgical treatment. Instead, she's dying because she vain, and so he is!"

"Connor handles lust. He'll tell you there are a lot of different kinds of love, and some of them are not even remotely healthy. Wars have been waged for love."

"You said you had a plan," Topaz said.

"Yes, we do. Your father hides a lot, and he has many of his subjects believing his lies. His taxes are bordering on unreasonable, and we all know he has every intention of raising them again," Tristan said. "He's telling everyone their taxes are going towards the kingdom's crime problem and making a show of arresting people, but we've walked through your streets at all hours. This is probably one of the safest kingdoms we've visited in a long time."

"We've been here watching, and we've been inside his palace," Adamo said. "We know in public, he gives off the impression of being a loving husband and father. We know how he treats his children behind closed doors and the warts he hides from his subjects. Kishi, to answer your question, he's fooled the entire kingdom. If the public thinks someone killed him, they will want them to pay without a trial. If it's tied to his children, they will drag them from the palace and hang them without asking them why they did it. If they think it was another kingdom, even with Callum on the throne, they will want war."

I didn't get it. I didn't even know what the druid king looked like, but I knew I wanted him dead. I understood he was a manipulative liar, but not that someone hadn't figured that out by now. No one tried to lie to us about why he committed that massacre in my home, but he'd murdered family members on land too. So they *had* to know deep down that their blood weren't criminals.

"We all know that," Topaz said, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

"Not everyone does," Salem pointed out. "There's an entirely different culture in the ocean that rarely collides with yours. Honestly, you're lucky they decided to keep their secret rather than waging war. Merfolk don't fuck around when it comes to war, and you see what a shark looks like on land. He could crush your skull with his bare hands. None of you are even remotely prepared to deal with sea witch magic, and we all know what would happen if the sirens joined in. So, maybe you can let us have ten minutes to explain how things really are here to the mermaid and shark who came here because your father massacred their family."

"Sorry," Topaz muttered.

"It's okay. I get it. I want him dead, and I haven't had to deal with him as long as you have. Taron and I are fast learners, but we can't know something unless we are taught. I'm not sure how Salem got a sea witch to trust him except for the fact that he's very pretty, but he's right. Things are very different where we came from."

Salem started laughing.

"I didn't seduce a sea witch into spilling any secrets. Adamo's girlfriend swam back home and approached the mermaid council. A mutually beneficial arrangement was proposed. The sea witch would teach me about ocean magic, and I'd work with her on coming up with new spells for the sea folk using what she taught me and what I know of magic on land. You can thank the two of us for Taron's legs."

"He's upset you took one of his cocks away, but I'm quite happy with just the one."

"I *adore* mermaids," Adamo said. "They always say exactly what they think."

"That was a huge point of conversation when we were coming up with the spell. Maryn was adamant it was natural for them to have two, and it took a lot of convincing it would scare women on land into mating with them. Finally, she insisted I get naked to prove my point. So I did, but only because I didn't know how many sharks were going to use the spell, and I knew exactly how it would go down if they fell in love."

"You must have been super young when you met that sea witch," Beck said. "I know *plenty* of women who are into that."

"I prefer talking to women and maybe snuggling with them over more carnal things, unlike my brothers. Still, even if there are women who like that kind of thing, there are plenty who don't. There are ample toys and willing men to fit those needs."

Topaz slammed her glass down and glared at everyone.

"I get that none of you can help it and have to go on and on when the subject of penises gets brought up, but can we focus? We've got a mermaid, a shark, and three sins here. None of us knew what they were until they told us. Our father is paranoid, but he's also cunning. He's going to figure out eventually there are strangers in his kingdom and send the guard."

"The druid princess is right," Tristan said. "We have a plan, and it *will* work if all of you follow it and don't deviate. Of course, we weren't counting on Kishi and Taron, but we are successful at what we do because we know how to adapt. But, of course, they will be included."

"And then you three princes need to do everyone a favor and give Kishi and Taron a proper tour of your kingdom," Adamo said. "Introduce them to all your favorite people and show them the best land has to offer. Because I'm guessing they've been pretending everything is just fine and haven't mentioned they probably won't be welcome back home when this is over."

I hadn't brought it up because I had been avoiding thinking about it. Taron and I weren't talking about it either, and we talked about everything. I didn't want to process it until I had my revenge.

"Kishi?" Beck said, squeezing me. "Why did you risk your family and home to come here? If you had run into his men instead of us, he would have killed you."

"Because my sister and Taron's family were important. Some hatchlings are just as curious about land as she was, and their dolphin nannies aren't there all the time. Even with the patrols, someone *will* sneak out and try to get a look up close. My sister wasn't a hatchling anymore, but she was still too young to die like that. So was Taron's family. Seira was young looking and small for a mermaid. She could have been mistaken for a hatchling since your people don't know us. They still butchered her. I have little faith the same wouldn't happen to one much younger than her. We came to stop this at the source, even if it means they banish us. The ocean is a big place, and Taron and I will still have each other."

"Or you could stay," Adamo said. "You and Taron clearly have a connection to Beck, and I see how Forrest and Callum look at you. You could have everything and maybe even be queen. The mermaid council isn't going to let you and Taron back. I think you knew that deep down when you left. They *will* allow you back to visit with your family if you bring something to the table. Like solidifying the alliance with the new druid king and passing his promises that nothing like that will ever happen again."

I knew everything he was saying was true. I didn't know how old he was, but he just had this look in his eyes that it was older than anyone I knew in the ocean. I grew up with the rules of the mermaid council, but Adamo and Salem dealt with them in a much different way. I was sulking like a hatchling because I was still holding onto the chance they'd let us home, even if the idea of staying with the druid princes sounded nice.

"If we tell them what we did, they might let us back," I pouted.

Taron shook his head sadly and kissed my forehead. He knew. Talora had warned both of us, and Taron knew all along we'd be homeless if we lived through this. He also knew me well enough to know that I would go and hope for the best. He came anyway to protect me.

"We'll miss you if you go back," Forrest said. "You and Taron could stay with us, and you'd want for nothing. The palace is on a private beach. The two of you could go back to the ocean and swim whenever you wanted without people gaping at you or getting bothered that Taron is there."

"You don't have to decide just yet," Callum said. "We need to deal with our father first. Then, we'll show you around and take you on proper dates. Beck just skipped that and went straight for the threesome. You need to meet people and be properly romanced. You need to meet our other sisters that aren't as mean as Topaz."

"Shut up, asshole," Topaz said, flinging a pillow at Callum.

"I think Topaz is lovely. She'd fit right in as a mermaid."

Topaz beamed at me, and Tristan cleared his throat.

"The druid princess is right. The entire reason none of you know about us is that we don't make a gigantic mess, even when it involves kings. Every king who took the throne by force is paranoid of someone returning the favor. The man your father overthrew was a gentle and good king, but some people believed he should have made war instead of alliances with certain countries. Your father was one of them. So he launched a dirty campaign to make people think the king had gone addled of the mind and made sure he was present with ideas when there were talks of replacing him."

"We know you know this," Salem said. "We're just explaining things to Taron and Kishi because that's not how things are done in the sea."

"A lot of this is very strange to us. If someone did that in the ocean, everyone would come together to run them through with their spears for not openly challenging them. We'd give you a chance to explain yourself for killing your father, even if we liked him because he was a liar."

"I wish we could do this the mermaid way and stab both of them," Topaz growled.

"Well, this is not the ocean, and if you want to pull this off and live through it, you're going to do it our way," Tristan snapped.

"Maybe you'd just better tell us what your big plan is and how we can help because Topaz has a lot of rage issues when it comes to our father and stepmother," Forrest said. "She's going to keep bringing up a brutal stabbing unless you give us a better alternative."

I was with Topaz on stabbing them, and I was pretty sure Taron would hold them down for me. But I'd been on land long enough to know things were done differently. I finally had to face the reality that we wouldn't be welcome home when this was over. I couldn't say I wasn't warned either. So I just chose to ignore them in my grief.

I didn't want Taron or the princes hurt, no matter how much I wanted revenge. So I was going to do *exactly* what these three sins proposed.

Then, I was going to let them show me around. If it was okay with Taron, staying on land with them wasn't a horrible idea.

CHAPTER 25

I had hoped we'd get straight to the part about killing the king and queen. Taron and I were good at that, and people in the ocean didn't get all pissy about it if it was justified like it was in this case. So I thought they'd get straight to the plan, then we'd do a little killing, but they went back to land history.

"We've been around since the first men evolved and started doing bad things. We'd go utterly mad if all we did were travel around punishing people," Salem started.

"How does that work if there are only seven of you?" Topaz demanded. "Everyone does bad things. For example, I'm technically betrothed to that butt ugly druid prince across the sea for a stupid alliance, but I'm cheating on him with a really hot shifter I'd much prefer marrying."

"That's love, Topaz. Every other kingdom in the world has revoked those outdated laws forbidden species to mix. This is the only one that still has them and enforces them. When we get Callum on the throne, I'm fairly certain he'll have a diplomatic way to get you out of that marriage while keeping the alliance."

"I'll also throw you the biggest wedding this kingdom has ever seen with you and your shifter."

"We should explain some things," Tristan said. "Everyone is flawed and sins—even us. We mess up all the time. No one is perfect, not even the Seven Deadly Sins. We don't track you down because you cheated on your spouse, lost your temper, got into a bar fight, or kept messing up your life. Some people are just prone to that and need to learn the hard way."

"We start getting feelings when someone is doing something they *know* is bad, even if they are trying to justify it to themselves. They have and generally are doing several of them because they are up to something. Like Salem said, we aren't perfect, and neither are our powers. We get a feeling and a vague direction of where we need to go. We have to do endless research to find out which ship we need to get on, then lie low while we observe and come up with a plan," Adamo said.

"But we would go crazy if that was all we did, and it takes a lot to get our attention," Salem said. "You have to be a special brand of evil to get all seven of us at once, and that hasn't happened in a long time. We've been alive a long time. We've seen kingdoms rise and fall. So if there's an opportunity to see something new in our long lives, we take it. Sometimes, even being there when a new baby is brought into the world is the most important thing that day."

"That's fascinating, but what does it have to do with stopping our father?" Beck asked.

All three of the Sins were smirking like this was going somewhere. Unfortunately, it just hadn't arrived yet.

"We have an estate here. It's how we've stayed hidden from your father. We have estates in nearly every kingdom because we travel a lot and like privacy. We all have hobbies because we'd go insane

if we didn't. I like books and research," Salem said. "Connor is quite the artist. His favorite subject is nude women and seducing them when he's finished, but he's also known for designing buildings."

"He's quite talented and has an eye for detail," Adamo said. "Kings have asked him to design their palaces. All seven of us were present when this land was discovered. It was a slow time for sinning, and this land was quite the discovery. We were on a massive trade convoy that was blown off course because of a storm. Our food and water stores were nearly gone when someone spotted land.

"There were plenty of people on the ships, and it was decided to make it a home. There was an abundance of fresh water, fruits and vegetables, and animals to eat. This place was like an undiscovered paradise. So we stayed and helped while they figured out a system of government and started building. Care to guess who designed the palace you live in?"

"Connor *adores* secret passages and false walls. If he designs something, they are going to be there. He also loves to hide things in his paintings. The only people who knew about the secret passages in the palace you live in now were the king that asked him to design it and his family."

"Every king lives with a certain amount of paranoia," Tristan said. "He told them about the passages before he added them, and they all wanted them, even if it meant someone could sneak through one and kill them in their sleep. It was a heavily guarded secret. Only the king and queen knew. Their children weren't told until they took the throne. It cut down on princes and princesses sneaking out and getting into trouble.

"This particular throne has been seized a few times now. Sometimes, it was bloody, and sometimes it wasn't. It's like that in every kingdom. Connor's passages are impossible to find unless you know where they are. We usually meet with the monarchy when we need to punish someone in their kingdom because it means less of a mess. None of them knew about the passages until we told them."

"A long time ago, Connor told a succubus queen about the passages in her castle. She demanded a tour and got infatuated with him. She tried every succubus trick to weave a spell on him before keeping him hostage. Finally, we had to use his passages to break him out and flee the kingdom in the dead of night. Connor's sin is Lust, and he tends to get in trouble with the ladies a lot. If we could spring him with the passages when the queen knew about them, then we can take care of your father and stepmother with them because we know they don't," Tristan said.

"It's interesting about the passages, but I'm still not sure how you intend to pull this off. If he knew about the passages, he'd have them sealed off, but he sleeps with guards outside his door. Neither of them is going to lie there and let you kill them. Especially we if all pop out of the wall. She'll immediately call for the guards, and he'll try to fight. You won't have enough time to kill either of them and disappear into the passage before the guards come," Callum said.

I had a feeling there was a lot more to this story. They just hadn't gotten there yet. If you need an answer about something you couldn't figure out in the ocean, you sought out the oldest creature you could find for advice. Sometimes, it was very long-winded and deviated from what you needed, like this story was doing, but a solution always presented itself.

Salem pulled out a vial of crystalline blue liquid and set it on the table.

"Kishi and Taron know what this is."

We both grinned. I was still trying to process that any mermaid council allowed a sea witch to work with him, but whoever they sent was completely thorough.

"The mermen made a stink about it, and now it's forbidden by most of the mermaid councils. That must have been after she taught you that potion."

Salem chuckled.

"When I was taught this potion, your mermen were blissfully unaware of its existence, and mermaids were giving the sea witches a lot of business."

Everyone looked confused, so I decided to explain.

"Mating in the ocean is not like it is here. There's a lot of fighting involved. Sometimes, you beat a merman half across the ocean with your tail, and he doesn't win. It can be exhausting and painful, and sometimes, you don't even get the pleasure of mating when it's over because he didn't prove himself. We love a good fight, but sometimes, we just aren't in the mood for it. Sometimes, we just want to overeat seafood and listen to crazy starfish conspiracy theories.

"Mermaids used to be able to barter this potion from a sea witch. It's totally harmless and doesn't have any side effects the next day. You used to be able to offer a merman a seaweed cordial with a drop in it. It's completely odorless and tasteless. They decide they want to go to sleep early instead of mating. It's supposed to induce a completely blissful night's sleep, but the mermen found out about it and had to complain about it. So it's forbidden now."

All three druid princes were frowning at me, and I didn't understand why. If we used this on the king and queen, we could happily stab both of them and disappear into the wall without tipping off the guards. This potion was how we did it without getting caught.

"Why do you magically drug the mermen instead of just telling them you don't want to mate?" Forrest asked.

"Because they don't listen, and you have to fight them anyway to shut them up. Does that work on land?"

"Most of the time," Tristan chuckled. "It's really fun to beat the shit out of the ones who don't listen."

"That's confusing. Anyway, if you can slip this potion to them, we can pull this off," I said.

"The plan isn't finished yet, Kishi. Think this through and hear them out. They've already told you what's at risk several times. I like them, and I know you do too. Staying on land with them doesn't sound horrible. We wouldn't have to fight all the time, and we could still have the ocean. We just have one more big fight left."

I grabbed Taron and kissed him. That was all I needed to hear. He came here for me and risked everything, but it sounded like he found happiness here. I could be happy too. I was one of the best hunters in the ocean, and I knew that took patience. I didn't know enough about my prey to kill it yet, but I had ample help.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm sure there's more to your plan."

"There is. The druid king has a bottle of wine sent up every morning. It's already been tasted for poison and spells. They pour from it all day and finish it before bed. All of his children need to make it a point to dine with him that night. Keep him busy talking. We'll sneak Kishi and Taron through the palace and add the potion to the bottle.

"All of you will go back to your beds and sleep after that. Yes, we sought you out because we wanted you to know what we are doing, and we want Callum on the throne, but we aren't turning any of you into killers. You'll hold lives in your hands when you're king, but we aren't putting the blood of your father on your hands," Tristan said.

"Kishi and Taron will be with us," Adamo said. "She might not be used to land, but Kishi said she's a hunter and understands stealth. Taron doesn't have his teeth, but I'll bet he can handle himself just fine in a fight. They need to be there, even if they aren't the ones sending them to their final death."

"We want to do it," I blurted it. "I still don't understand how you're going to do it without putting

the blame on someone."

Adamo leaned forward and smirked.

"We're good at this, little mermaid. You'll get your revenge, and your people will be safe. Not a single soul will guess it was murder. Then, you can build yourself a little land harem right on the beach and have everything."

I believed them. We just needed to kill a king and queen, and I could have everything I never knew I wanted when I was still in the ocean.

CHAPTER 26

The sins told us how they intended to pull this off. It was confusing to both Taron and myself because no one did that kind of thing in the ocean, even in grief. Taron and I were upset about the loss of our family, but it didn't even cross our minds to hurt ourselves in our grief. Instead, we risked everything to kill the person responsible.

There was a certain deviancy to their plan that I really liked. They weren't mermaids, but they sure plotted like us. Sometimes, you had to face a bigger, stronger foe in the ocean. Mermaids weren't massive, and there were plenty of dangerous creatures that weren't our friends. Even some of the sharks and whales weren't with us. So you had to rely on wits and cunning to beat them.

I wanted Beck to stay. I wanted Forrest and Callum to stay the night too. But I understood why they couldn't. So tomorrow night, we were making our move. We were doing what we came here to do.

I started out intending to use them to kill the druid king. If you had asked me when we met them on the street, I would have said I didn't care if they went down for his death or war broke out on land because of what we did. That wasn't me, even before Seira was butchered. That was my grief, turning me into just as giant a monster as the druid king was.

As soon as I realized how kind his sons were and how lovely things were on land, I snapped right out of that. We fought when needed in the ocean, but it was for survival or against an enemy. I may have thought so before because it was how I was taught, but not everyone on land was our enemy. Even when war broke out in the ocean, you didn't kill innocents.

They left us alone, and I was way too keyed up to sleep. This was one of those times I'd grab Taron, and we'd have furious races all over the ocean. Taron was massive, but we were both built for speed. It was always a tossup who would win, and it always got our minds off anything. It was also completely exhausting, and I slept quite peacefully afterward.

I'd happily deal with the excruciating pain that came with getting my tail back to go back to the ocean with Taron. Especially since I knew it would eventually stop. We couldn't risk it. We both knew the land dwellers weren't our enemy, but Taron couldn't be in the water with them unless it were on the private beach that was mentioned.

The water would be full of blood, and I couldn't do a thing to stop it. Taron could ignore people in the water unless they got too close, or they were bleeding. They'd attack him if they saw him, and he'd fight back. I knew not all of the people here were bad, and the ones I'd met so far hadn't tried to hurt me. I knew killing people was frowned upon here, but I'd learned enough on land to know people were fascinated with mermaids. Someone might try to keep me prisoner.

I pulled Taron into bed and snuggled into him. He nuzzled my head with his cheek.

"No mating tonight, Kishi. We need to focus and rest. This is happening tomorrow night. The plan is good, but remember where we came from. Even if the plan is flawless, an otter is always going to swim in and ruin it. I'm sure some of these people on land are really otters."

"I guess it's too much to ask for that a lot of things on land are nice, but we can't get away from the otters."

"Beck, Forrest, and Callum remind me of sharks," Taron said.

"A little. They certainly have the same honor, and they want to protect their people. Us too. Why did you kiss Beck and invite him to bed?"

"Because I wanted to see what it felt like. I enjoyed it, and I knew you liked him too. I don't feel threatened by him or feel the need to fight him for you. I thought it would be enjoyable for all of us. I had fun. Based on the noises you made, you did too."

"Oh, I did. What about Forrest and Callum?"

"I don't want to fight them either, but I don't think they would enjoy kissing me like Beck does. I think they would like to be invited to touch you, but not me. So I'm okay with that."

"That's not a very sharklike thing to say, but I like it."

"I enjoy mating—a lot. I never used to think about fighting my friends and family to do it, but we hurt each other. I'm proud of the scars I earned in battle, and sharks don't hold it against you if you injured them when it comes to a female.

"Honestly, it's nice not to have to do that. I learned a lot from Beck that night. You aren't even remotely built like a shark, and I don't know the first thing about making you feel good. I want to. Beck, Forrest, and Callum can show me how."

"I'll bet there are ways for you and Beck to feel good together."

"Maybe. But I only want to do that if you're with us. I like Beck, but I love you."

"Taron, you knew we weren't going to be able to go home, but you didn't try to stop me from leaving and followed me, anyway. Why did you do that, you asshole?"

"Because I lost everyone when that ship came. I was the only shark that escaped the net. I couldn't save them, and I couldn't save Seira. I won't lose you too. If you left, you could have died. Even if you succeeded, they wouldn't let you come back home. I couldn't deal with not knowing. I thought we'd go back to the ocean and make a home together, but then we got here. We don't have to be alone. I was going to find a way to get us back to the water and figure out your pain, but we have an answer to that too."

"Why do you think they drill into us it's so bad here? The man who made that statue Beck has loved that mermaid. I don't think he was keeping her hostage. Adamo seemed remorseful he hurt the mermaid he was dating but seemed happy she found a new love. They sent a sea witch to land to work with Salem. They tell us everything is horrible here, so we don't even try to visit. I'm sure Adamo's girlfriend and that sea witch spread the word not everyone here is terrible."

"I think they know that. It could be two things. Adamo said it took his girlfriend many moons of getting wet before the pain stopped. So maybe they don't know it stops. Or it could be something we've learned on land. Mermaids can only mate with mermen, and sharks can only mate with other sharks.

"It's literally impossible to mate with someone in the ocean unless they are like you. It's not like that here, and from what the Sins said, the people here used to be against people mixing like that. Most everyone is okay with it now, but some people like the druid king aren't. We had this conversation already. If you got pregnant on land, what kind of hatchlings would you have? I'll bet they would be totally adorable, and all of us could handle them together, but I'll bet the idea

terrifies the people back home. What if you have a little mermaid hatchling with druid magic?"

"What if the two of us had a cute little merman with shark teeth? We could raise him to be more like a shark than a merman."

"A little hatchling merman with two rows of razor sharp teeth sounds like the cutest thing I've ever seen."

"We just need to finish what we came here for. I've changed my opinion about a lot of things since we got here, and I'm grateful we don't have to fight as much, but I can't wait to kill both of them."

"Me either. I don't mind having legs, and I understand why they want to do it the way they do. But, it would sure be nice to rip his head off with my teeth after what he did to our family."

"That would be extremely sexy, but their way means our revenge lasts for eternity. His people won't know the truth, but he'll be watching us, knowing what really happened from the afterlife. He'll see Callum undoing some of his laws and not ruling out of fear. He'll know he was murdered in his sleep, and not a single soul is trying to avenge him. So the druid king will have nothing to do for the rest of eternity but be bitter about that."

"That's evil. I love it. Get some sleep, Kishi. It's finally happening tomorrow."

I settled into Taron's arms and closed my eyes. The man who butchered my sister and Taron's family was finally going to pay for it. I could force myself to sleep to be well rested for that.

CHAPTER 27

I was almost certain the brothers weren't going to be back to Beck's love nest until this was over. I'd miss talking to them, but I understood, and even if I liked them a lot, I didn't need them around complimenting me all the time. There were some mermaids like that, and I honestly wanted to stab some of them with my spear.

When we woke up, I could hear voices and noises from outside the door. I knew it wasn't my princes. They were quiet when we were sleeping. Someone was arguing beyond the door. Taron heard it too.

I bolted awake and grabbed my abalone dagger. Taron and I crashed through the door, ready to fight, but the three sins were standing there, so we immediately put our fists and weapons down and calmed ourselves. Adamo just chuckled.

"I forgot mermaids aren't shy about nudity."

"Stop staring," Salem snapped, slapping him on the back of the head.

"We didn't mean to wake you," Tristan said. "We know the princes have been feeding you since you can't hunt for yourselves right now. They need to show their faces at the palace for this to work, but you two don't need to starve. So we came to make sure you were fed."

"Why fighting?" Taron asked.

"Well, I dated a mermaid, and Salem lived with a sea witch for a while. We know your diet is more than just raw seafood. We were both taught recipes and were there while they were modified for land. Certain parts of the world eat raw fish on land too. It's delicious, and you should totally introduce your druids to it. Both of us have different recipes for mussel and seaweed salad, and we both think ours is superior. We were arguing over who was going to make it."

"Are all men like this on land? Mermen hunt, but they don't even try to learn to feed themselves. Unmated mermen either live off what they hunted or go home to their mothers for prepared food. You all seem to know how to cook here and have no problem doing it for women."

Salem chuckled. He was the only Sin who wasn't staring at my naked body in appreciation.

"Some men are like that on land too. Beck, Callum, and Forrest have the best chefs in this entire kingdom preparing their meals. If they get hungry, they can ask anyone in the palace for anything they want, and it'll be brought up to their rooms. Given their father, those three could be quite spoiled and ended up just like him, but they took after their mother. You have no idea how much you lucked out with them, and I don't just mean that they want to help."

"I've been glad Taron didn't kill them when they knocked me over in the street for a while now. Why don't you make both recipes? Taron and I eat a lot."

Salem cleared his throat.

"Why don't the two of you put some clothes on while we cook?"

"I want to learn," I said. "They've cooked me land food. I want to show them food from my home."

"Me too," Taron said.

Tristan started laughing.

"Adamo will teach you like that, but Salem won't let you in the kitchen unless you put clothes on. Our brother Kobe enjoys cooking in the nude, and he's burned his bits frying things in grease more than once. He still insists on making breakfast naked, even if we've tried to talk him out of it."

Taron and I just shrugged and went back to the bedroom to get dressed. It wasn't taking as long for me since Taron learned how to tie me into these awful dresses. We were both pretty excited to go out there and meet the Sins for a cooking lesson. I almost forgot what we were going to be doing tonight. Almost. It was still there in the pit of my gut.

The Sins were something else. I really liked them. I didn't want to kiss them or mate with them like my druid princes, and I knew it would bother Taron if I did. But, they were just new friends, and that was okay.

Salem and Adamo were teaching us several modified mermaid recipes. They were familiar to me. My mother taught them to Seira and me. She made it fun, just like they were doing now. They weren't just teaching us how to cook either. They were helping Taron getting better with talking out loud.

He'd figured out a lot on his own, and I was so proud of him. He didn't care about it before, but he wanted it now. I knew he would eventually come to that conclusion. Taron wouldn't have wanted me speaking for him in the ocean, and even back home, we weren't attached at the fin.

Taron and Beck had a thing that was separate from ours. I was sure Taron wanted to ask him things in private. There were probably things on land that the brothers enjoyed doing that Taron would too that I would completely despise. I wanted them to go out and have fun. Something told me I'd enjoy hanging out with Topaz while they were doing that.

She might have legs and be a druid princess, but she reminded me a lot of a mermaid. I was fairly certain she wouldn't get eaten or poisoned if it was magically possible to give her a tail to go swimming with. I respected that and liked that she fought with dresses and words. She was probably good with magic and fists too. My princes would have taught her that.

I'd give it to Adamo and Salem. By the time they were done with us, Taron talked much better and smiled up a storm. We had an entire spread of food from home that we could make to pay the brothers back for spoiling us with land food. And it tasted good too.

"Now, some seafood can be served raw like how you eat in the ocean," Salem said. "We enjoyed it in other kingdoms long before Adamo met his mermaid. You just need to remove the bones and skin, slice it up, and serve it over rice with a little vinegar. They'll love it. Some seafood needs to be cooked, or people on land will get sick, especially if it's been out of the ocean for a long time."

"We don't eat certain things in the ocean either. Things rot and make us sick in the ocean too. This is really good. Do you enjoy eating this too? Do you think the princes would like it if we made this for them?"

"It's not just that it tastes good," Adamo said. "Mesi didn't just miss food from home. She really liked land food. She wanted to share her food with me. I'd already taught her how to use the stove, and she'd mastered several recipes. There was a lot of trial and error to get this right, but a lot of love went into it.

"I never told her when it tasted bad because just that she was trying meant a lot to me. She always knew. She'd eat one bite, then take my plate away and throw it in the trash. She kept trying until it was

perfect, like what you're eating. It was the effort and love that went into it and that it tastes good. My brother Kobe handles Gluttony, and he loves cooking. He'll tell you one of the simplest ways to tell someone you love them is to cook for them, even if you are bad at it."

"I only have my recipes because Umiko insisted the food they ate in the sea was superior. She hated eating alone and thought it was wasteful to make two separate meals. She mostly just had something to prove. She didn't decide she was in love with me until much later. I like women and relationships, but there are certain things I don't enjoy giving. I was fond of her, but I couldn't give her what she needed, so I broke things off."

Taron and I were both gaping at Salem. It wasn't a concept in the ocean, but I understood he enjoyed intimacy, but not mating. Now that I'd slept in Taron and Beck's arms, it was a beautiful thing. Taron and I did that last night after talking for hours. In some ways, it was better than mating. Still, no sane person tried to get the interest of a sea witch unless they were in it for the long haul.

"And she didn't drown you or curse you? That doesn't sound like a sea witch."

"Sea witches have a poor reputation. All magic has a price, even in the ocean. On land, sometimes, we know it, and sometimes we don't. Every supernatural creature has unique powers, and they will tell you they are superior, but everyone has a downside. Sea witches have the ability to know what the price of their magic is. They are upfront and honest about it, but people think they are just cruel. Taron wouldn't be here if it weren't for a sea witch. I'm certain she explained to both of you what would happen if you came to land, and you came anyway."

"She told me," Taron said. "When you were swimming."

"So help me, Taron, if the price were more than just not being able to go home, you'd better tell me right now."

"That's still an enormous price, Kishi," Salem said. "Sharks aren't given any type of education about land like mermaids are. He doesn't even eat the same things you do in the ocean. Taron has probably never even swum in the shallows to see land from the top of the water. He had no idea what he was walking into, just that you were going to be there, and he wouldn't be allowed back home. You're a mermaid, but half of you is like us here on land. It was never like that for Taron until he accessed the magic and changed."

I flung myself at Taron, and his entire chair tipped over. I thought I knew what he was doing coming here with me, but I really had no idea. He hadn't made a single complaint this entire time. He took everything in and learned from it. Yes, there was a stabbing incident and some growling, but that was totally understandable.

"You big, stupid shark. I love you did this for me, and I love you. We're going to have that little merman baby with shark teeth and be happy here on land after we murder the druid king and his evil wife."

"I love happy endings," Adamo sighed.

"It's not happy yet," Tristan pointed out. "Even our best plans have hiccups, and things always get hairy when the monarchy is involved."

"Yeah, but only when we have to get an entirely new ass on the throne," Adamo said. "His entire family hates him."

"Topaz hates them both *a lot,*" Salem said. "Enough to not follow instructions."

"She won't," I said. "She wants them dead, but not enough to risk her family. She's similar to a mermaid in that regard. Something might go wrong, but it won't be Topaz."

"Make sure it's not the two of you either," Tristan said.

I tossed my long, white hair over my shoulder.

“I might not have done it on land before, but Taron and I are both capable of keeping it together while we kill someone.”

“I’m sure,” Adamo said. “Just keep in mind there are all kinds of scenarios that could happen here that you would never experience in the ocean. So follow our lead and don’t do anything crazy. All three of us know the plan is good. We just have a weird feeling about it.”

Taron and I both had seen battle before. We knew how to follow orders. We wanted him dead, but if something went wrong, it would not be because of us.

CHAPTER 28

It was time. We spent the day chatting, and I learned a lot from Salem and Adamo. They taught us a few more recipes from home for lunch and dinner. Taron's speech was getting so much better, but I knew we would always talk in our own way sometimes. I learned a good bit about mermaids on land, and Salem really opened my eyes about sea witches.

If we had never met the Sins, Taron and I probably always would have thought Talora helped us because she was fond of Seira and wanted revenge as much as I did. Sea witches were the keepers of balance just as much as the druids were. Talora knew full well what would happen to Taron and me if we left, but she also knew many people would die if we didn't at least try to stop it.

Taron and I weren't even mad she sacrificed us for that. I think she knew we wouldn't be if we ever found out. Talora knew more about mermaids and sharks fleeing to land than she told us. She told us what the price was, but she left out many of the details that might have talked me out of going, like the excruciating pain that came with changing.

Talora knew me. She knew I'd deal with it until I either finished what I came to land to do or died in the process. Everything in the ocean was a test for survival. If you were weak when it came to anything, you died. If you couldn't fight your way through extreme pain to fight your way out or get to an antidote for the many poisonous things in the ocean, you were going to die a horrible death.

I believed the same thing Adamo and Salem did. The pain was just another test to see if you could stick it out on land. We could do this. Mermaids believed in omens, and sometimes, that could just be a bad feeling. All three Sins had one, so something was definitely going to go wrong. We just needed to be mentally prepared for that. I already knew Taron would be, and the Sins had done this before.

I only got to see a little of this kingdom before the brothers crashed into us. When they took us to Beck's love nest, they didn't take us down a route with lighting. Instead, they called some sort of light to their hands and snuck us down dark streets that frankly smelled a little funny.

I was sure this was a beautiful kingdom, but we seemed to be taking that same route again. We were slipping between buildings with just the moon and stars lighting our way. I was *dying* to ask what that smell was, but I knew better than to open my mouth and risk drawing attention to us. Taron smelled it, too, because his nose was wrinkled up.

The air got much fresher when we got closer to the ocean and the trees and away from the street. I felt the call of the ocean tugging at me when my feet hit the sand. I wanted to rip my clothes off and jump in the water, even if I knew the pain was going to be awful. Taron slipped his hand in mine and squeezed. He was feeling it too. We'd come way too far just to abandon everything now. Plus, if something went wrong, we needed to help Salem, Tristan, and Adamo.

Tristan cocked his head towards a cave, and we all followed. I didn't know it was there until

Adamo moved some moss out of the way. Then, when we were further enough in that no one could hear us, the Sins risked talking.

"If something goes wrong, the two of you need to run straight to the passage and out to the beach. Get in the water immediately. Guards will be everywhere if they think there is an intruder in the castle. It won't be long before they search the beach. They can't get to you in the water, and there will be more of them than there are of us. I know neither of you has ever run from a fight, but unless you want to die, you'll run from this one."

"What about the three of you?" I asked.

"We're immortal, and we heal. We'll figure something out. If we don't, our brothers will figure out something went wrong and come make a mess. We try to avoid it, but sometimes, it can be fun," Adamo said.

"We're pretty adaptable on the fly, though," Salem said. "If something goes wrong, there's still a chance to pull this off, but not if we are worrying about the two of you getting caught."

"I will carry her to water," Taron said.

I scowled at Taron because I knew he'd do that. If he thought I was in danger, he'd carry me all the way to be beach and throw me in the water, so I didn't have a single chance of running back in there and helping. It was in every instinct in my body not to leave someone behind to die. Apparently, these three sins couldn't die, so no matter how much I wanted to be there when the druid king died, I also wasn't stupid. I'd do exactly what they said and flee to the water with Taron.

The scene was already in place. While Adamo and Salem were teaching us how to cook, Tristan snuck off and slipped the potion in the wine while the king and his wife were pretending everything was okay.

That was part of why the plan was so beautiful. No one really *liked* the druid king, but they thought he kept them safe. From what everyone said, the people loved Beck, Callum, and Forrest's mother. However, they didn't particularly care for his second wife. She was cruel to servants and never had a kind word for anyone.

The only people in the entire kingdom who knew she was sick were the royal family and physicians threatened with death if they told anyone. She never stayed away and rested like she probably should have. She was constantly in public, but it was getting harder to hide. No one would dare ask because apparently, she was wholly unpleasant, but people were starting to whisper about her health. They might not like her, but they could all agree the druid king doted on her way more than the mother of his children.

It wasn't past my attention that I was sneaking through secret tunnels in the walls to murder two people I'd never met. I didn't even know what they looked like. I didn't feel the slightest bit bad about it. One of them was murdering people, and I'd heard enough about the wicked stepmother. They were a lot alike. He would have told her what he was doing to save her, and she clearly didn't try to talk him out of it.

The tunnels didn't smell as bad as the streets, but this smell kept tickling my nose. I knew what dust was because Forrest explained it to us when he told Beck he needed to clean the wardrobe some of our clothes were in. It was everywhere in these tunnels, and it kept invading my nose. It tickled and made me want to sneeze.

I was trying to hold it in because the Sins started to whisper we were close. We stood in the tunnel, but something was wrong. The druid king and his wife should have been passed out. It was forbidden long before I was born, but if a sea witch wanted to craft a potion to deal with incessant mermen who couldn't take no for an answer, it was going to knock them out. Even if Salem was the

one who made it, everyone in that room should have been asleep.

I could hear the muffled sounds of someone crying beyond the wall. Those were cries of pain, and it sounded like they were coming from something small. Most everyone in the ocean found it offensive to hurt the young, but some went after them because it was easy.

If Taron and I found out about it, we went hunting to deliver some payback, no matter how big they were. I knew I said I'd follow the Sins plan, but that was before I heard someone crying behind the wall. I wasn't familiar with all the different species on land. Some of them could be dangerous to mermaids. But, I still didn't think their young should be hurt.

Taron heard it too and stepped towards the wall. We were both ready to charge in there. I trusted the Sins and was willing to follow their plan. I'd run if they needed me to. They'd better not send us to the ocean with a hatchling in trouble. Salem, Tristan, and Adamo stepped in front of us. Taron growled, and I bared my teeth at them.

"Stop. Do you trust us?"

"Yes, but the next words out of your mouth better be about saving that hatchling. Why didn't you rescue it when you were putting the potion in the wine?"

"That's a wolf pup. Listen to the whine in the cry. There wasn't anyone in the room before. He's changed tactics since the mermaids crashed his ship. Druids do a lot of magic with the moon cycles. Wolves have a deep tie to the moon. Their entire magic that gives them the ability to shift was gifted from the moon. Back when ritual sacrifice was still an active thing, some of the eviler druids were trying to figure out a way to steal magic from other species gifted with moon magic.

"It's not possible. Countless species have tried to figure out how to steal magic to get stronger. Vampires used to think it could be done with blood. The wolves thought it could be done with the moon. He's done terrible things that have long been proven not to work. This is just the next phase of it," Salem said.

I put my hands on my hips and glared at Salem. Taron and I both appreciated him taking the time to explain so much to us, but those cries were piercing right into my soul.

"We know he's terrible. I couldn't save my sister, and Taron couldn't save his family. But if you get out of our way, we can save that wolf pup."

"We want to save that pup as much as you do. But, we have to change the plan, Kishi. If we return that pup back home, their family is going to want revenge. It's not going to make sense that the king tortured their pup while his wife was dying and killed himself in grief," Adamo said.

"I only liked our plan because it wasn't messy," Tristan said. "Maybe it should be. He lied to his people while framing and murdering innocents. What he did in the water was unacceptable. He's hurting children now. He doesn't deserve to die with his people still believing he was a good king. It's time to let everyone know the truth."

I was all for that, but maybe I did need a few things explained still.

"Whatever you are suggesting better mean Callum, Beck, Forrest are safe."

"They will be, little mermaid," Adamo said. "Callum will take the throne, and you'll have a land harem. We'd never break up true love, and Callum is going to make an amazing king. Plus, I think if we hurt her brothers, Topaz will maim us, and I hate regrowing body parts."

"So will I, and I'm exceptionally good with several weapons."

"I will bite you," Taron said.

Don't ask me how he did this because he hadn't this entire time. He didn't even do it when he was threatening to stab princes with forks for touching me. Taron opened his mouth, and he had two rows of shark teeth, but he hadn't turned into a shark. That was incredibly sexy.

“Put those away, Taron. Plans frequently change in our line of work. We had a feeling something was going to go wrong, and there’s a hurt wolf pup in there. That’s about as wrong as it gets. He needs to pay for that, and the way we intend on doing it means you’ll get to tell your story about what he did to your people.”

That would be nice, but my immediate concern was that crying wolf pup and putting a knife into the two sleeping people in that room who had hurt them. I liked them and didn’t want to hurt the Sins, but they needed to get out of our way because Taron was with me on this.

“Calm down, both of you. We need to get Callum, Beck, and Forrest right this minute so they can gather the wolf Alphas. The best way to rescue that pup without dragging the princes down with the king is to get the packs involved. We all want to fight for the pup in there, but we have to do it the right way. The packs are probably worried sick. They need to be brought in on this.”

“I get it,” I said. “But I don’t get why you’re going to leave a hurt pup behind to get their family. I’m sure someone saw them sneak them into the bedroom. What if someone comes back and hurts the pup?”

Salem just smirked and pulled his bag off his shoulder.

“We come prepared for any and all scenarios. I don’t just know sea witch magic. I know every form of magic practiced. So if I hear about something new popping up, I get on a ship. Set these along the wall.”

Salem started handing out crystals. I recognized them from Beck’s place. He showed them to us and explained they were all used for different things. It made sense to me because plenty of coral in the ocean had magical properties. I didn’t know what it would do when I placed the crystals against the wall, but I trusted they would work.

Salem wasn’t done. Once the wall was lined with crystals, he took out a jar and sprinkled powder. He pressed a button, so part of the wall slid open just a little bit. Next, Salem took out a bushel of herbs and lit it on fire. He blew it out, so that it was smoking and stuck it in the gap in the wall.

“Hello?” the little wolf called.

“Hi, there, brave wolf. We’re here to help. The king and queen won’t wake until morning and can’t hurt you anymore. I set a protective barrier around the room so no one can come in unless I want it. I set Holy Basil burning to calm your fears. We’re going to have to leave you to gather the wolves and the princes, so the bad king and queen pay for hurting you. Can you be brave until we get back?” Salem said.

I’d never met a wolf before, but the pup immediately stopped crying.

“My dad is the Alpha. I’m just as brave as he is. I’m going to lead my pack one day and be an Alpha wolf princess. My dad is going to eat the king and queen for hurting me, and he’ll even let me bite them.”

“Did you get a few good bites in when they were hurting you?” Salem asked.

“Just with my regular teeth. They were burning wolfsbane so that I couldn’t shift. If they hadn’t taken my wolf away, I would have killed them both.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Cassandra. Go get my pack before my dad starts a war with the wrong person because I’m missing.”

I had a feeling I was going to like the wolves. Cassandra was pretty brave and calm, considering the two most influential people in this kingdom had kidnapped and tortured her. I wanted to rush in there and rescue her without thinking about the consequences.

She'd been here longer than I had, and she'd probably met Forrest, Beck, and Callum plenty of times. She might have just had her eyes open about how evil the king was, but she probably knew deep down his sons weren't.

She understood how things worked on land much more than Taron and I did. I didn't like leaving her in pain, but all she needed to know was that help was on the way. The Sins said this needed to be done a certain way, but the hurt wolf agreed with them.

I grabbed Taron's hand and squeezed it. I didn't have to ask him. Everyone agreed the only way we were going to pull this off was getting messy with the wolves.

Taron and I were entirely on board with that now.

CHAPTER 29

All three druid princes knew about the secret passages in the castle, but even Taron and I knew it was a bad idea to jump out of one and surprise them. They weren't paranoid like their father was, but guards were still outside their door since they were princes. I hadn't seen them, but apparently, they were all over the palace.

I knew enough to know the guards weren't going to answer to Callum until he was king, and if they thought he was working against his father, he'd be arrested. We didn't need that.

I knew of a much more pleasant way to wake them up that wouldn't make them want to fight anyone. So I slipped into their beds one by one, snuggled into them, and kissed them until they were awake. The druid princes might be utterly different from mermaids, but sex worked on land or in the ocean.

We didn't have much time, so as soon as they woke up and started to kiss me back, I got their attention to tell them the plan had changed. They immediately got dressed. They had to be seen going out of the front door for this to work. The rest of us would still be sneaking through the walls.

I thought we would be walking to the wolves, but we met up at a funny smelling building with land monsters in it. Taron's sharp teeth came out, and I pointed my knife at them. They kept tossing their evil heads and stomping their feet. Beck put his hand on my arm and lowered my blade.

"Why did you bring us to land monsters?"

"Those are horses, and you're scaring them. We need them to get to the wolves before the potion wears off, and they wake up and hurt that wolf," Tristan said.

"It's like when you grab Taron or a dolphin's fin to get somewhere faster," Adamo said.

"We aren't dumb enough to try to hitch a ride on a monster in the ocean."

"Horses are perfectly lovely and not monsters. So put the blade and teeth away, and we'll show you."

"It looks like a monster, and I don't like how they are staring at me."

Forrest reached into a bag on the wall and placed something in my hand. He gave some to Taron too. I looked down, and it was cubes of sugar like I put in the tea they served I liked so much. I doubted anyone was making tea out here, so I had no idea why sugar was just hanging around. I was suspicious.

Forrest stepped in front of me and pulled me into a hug.

"These are our horses, Kishi. They aren't monsters. We trained them ourselves, and they've never once hurt us. We want you to be friends with our horses because we use them often for travel. So if you stop threatening them with knives and feed them sugar, they'll be your best friend."

"That thing is going to bite my arm off if I get close to it."

Forrest chuckled and kissed my forehead.

"Horses eat vegetables and hay. We give them beer too. Horses don't eat people. They'll kick the shit out of you if you piss them off, but they don't bite. Do you trust us?"

I growled, then sighed. I trusted all of them, and they all said we needed these land monsters to beat the druid king and rescue Cassandra. There were things on land I still didn't understand. We killed monsters in the ocean instead of trying to tame them. I didn't trust those horses, but no one had lied to me about anything yet.

I stepped out of Forrest's arms and cocked my head at Taron. If we were going to feed monsters sugar, we were going to do it together. I stretched my arm out as far as it would go. There was half a wall between that beast and me, but I wasn't stupid. I was keeping my distance, especially when the thing snorted at me.

Every instinct in me was screaming to have my dagger out, but I put it away. Since when was I worried about scaring monsters? The thing didn't bite me. Its nose was actually warm and soft as it nuzzled my palm. It didn't bite me at all. Its lips tickled my palm as it ate the sugar. When it finished, it was looking for more.

"Your monster is funny," I told Forrest.

"I like it," Taron said.

Tristan came out of the building. He had disappeared for a minute.

"The horses are saddled up."

"Some animals are companions on land," Salem said. "We use horses for travel and farming. Some dogs are spoiled little fat potatoes that people buy because they are cute. Some of them protect farms, and some help with hunting. Some of them are dangerous, but plenty of them aren't."

"Kishi, you ride with Callum. Taron will ride with me," Beck said.

I wasn't afraid of the horses anymore, but Taron and I both needed help to get on top of one. I didn't feel entirely safe sitting up there until Callum climbed behind me and wrapped his brawny arm around my waist. He wouldn't let me fall, and he knew this horse.

I shrieked when Callum kicked his horse, and it took off running. My hair was billowing behind me as we raced through the streets, and Callum had his powerful arms around me. It differed from hitching a ride with a shark or a dolphin, but it was exhilarating.

I threw back my head and laughed. I could hear Taron behind me doing the same. Then, finally, something in the forest answered us, and the horses started to slow down. Strange beasts with glowing yellow eyes started spilling into the woods, then they all turned into naked men and women. Their change seemed to be much less painless than mine.

They seemed to recognize the princes but kept sniffing the air and staring at the rest of us suspiciously.

"Who did you bring into my woods, Callum? My pup is missing, and we've been searching all night. The people on your horses don't smell like anything we've met before. If they hurt my pup, I want to deal with them myself."

"Those three men are part of the Seven Deadly Sins. Kishi is a mermaid, and Taron is a shark. They didn't have anything to do with Cassandra, but we know who did. The Sins, the mermaid, and the shark know things about our father many people don't know. They came to stop him from hurting any more innocent people. When they got to him, they heard Cassandra crying in his room.

"They made sure the king and queen would be sleeping until morning. He would have given orders for no one to be let into his bedroom. If they stuck to the plan they had and snuck Cassandra out, it would have ended badly. You wouldn't have known what they were and attacked them. If you

stopped to hear them out, they would have told you my father kidnapped her. You would have wanted vengeance against all of us, and my brothers and I are against everything he's been doing. You would have stormed the castle, and the guards would have defended it. More people would have died."

"The little pup is safe and quite brave," Salem said. "The king and queen won't wake for a long time. I put a protection around the room so that no one is getting in unless I allow it. I have Holy Basil burning to calm her. We spoke to her, and she wanted you."

"She was crying in pain. Taron and I wanted to go in there and slit their throats, but we were told we should get you instead. That was what she said she wanted, and we don't totally understand everything here on land yet," I said.

"It's not up to you to get justice for my pup," he growled. "It's up to the wolves."

"He sent men in a ship to my home and butchered my sister and all of Taron's family before we sunk the ship. So we're owed some justice too. We lost our home coming here to get it. We couldn't save our family, but we desperately wanted to save your pup. You don't hurt hatchlings in the ocean."

No one seemed to mind that the entire wolf pack was naked, and they weren't covering up. However, it left me with a lot more questions about why they insisted on these dresses on land. Maybe I should spend more time with the wolves.

"All three of you have always been a friend to the wolves. You don't look down on us like the king and queen, and I know you are here to help. So, in the spirit of truce and me not ripping all your throats out, why don't you tell us why the king kidnapped my pup and massacred the mermaids?"

"I think you know deep down that all of the wolves who have been arrested were decent wolves. Unfortunately, so was everyone else he's arrested for a crime. Our stepmother found a lump, but she's declined any available treatment because of vanity. The frame jobs are so flawless, and we haven't been able to prove what he's doing. He has everyone so keyed up about dangerous criminals that they *want* them to die when they are arrested."

"No one likes your stepmother, Callum, but why the big ruse over a lump?"

"Since she declined any known treatment that would save her life, they started dipping into magic and snake oil. When that didn't work, he started looking into magic that has been proven not to work and has long been forbidden. Next, he tried sacrificing different species under the ruse of them being criminals. When that didn't work, he sent a whole crew to their deaths to violate the treaty with the mermaids."

"You'd better be very careful about what you say next, Callum. What does that have to do with my pup?"

"He's trying to harness the moon magic that allows her to shift and give it to the queen to heal her," Salem said. "It won't work, and it's forbidden. He needs a live wolf to work with and went for an option less likely to rip his throat out."

"Cassandra is perfectly capable of ripping his throat out. Don't let her age fool you. She has alpha blood in her veins, and she's a vicious hunter," he huffed.

"He had wolfsbane burning in the room so that she couldn't shift," Adamo said. "There was a lot of it in his chambers. We dumped it in the chamber pot and put it out. She should have her wolf back by now, but Cassandra and the rest of us need her pack."

"You shut your mouth. I don't know you. I appreciate what you did for my pup, but we don't know you. The king didn't kill your family either, so you have no reason to stick your nose in this like the sea people. The guards at the palace won't know what you are either and will want you dead. We know the princes, and they've proven themselves to everyone in this kingdom, especially the wolves. I'll hear this from them."

Adamo and Tristan grumped about that, but Salem just bowed his head to the Alpha and let him continue. I didn't know who would win in a fight between a wolf and a Sin, but I really didn't want to find that out at this minute. We had too much to do, and there was a time limit on that potion.

"This was actually their plan, and they brought us in on it, Harland, but we know trust has to be earned with the packs. So we need you to call every pack in the kingdom. We're going to travel to the castle, making as much noise as possible. We want people to come to the street and ask what we are doing.

"We want as many people as possible to know he's kidnapped a wolf pup. Most of the common people dislike him but respect him because they believe his lies about crime. The wealthy tolerate him because he makes them richer. Every class can agree you don't hurt children. The people he keeps around the palace are fiercely loyal to both of them. If the three of us tried to get in there alone, they'd overpower us and arrest us until he could cover it up. They might be stupidly loyal to him, but they aren't stupid. If half the kingdom shows up, they'll be outnumbered and won't have time to call for backup. The alternative is to hear us out and let the room be searched or die," Callum said.

"He thinks druids are superior, and it's the only supernatural race he trusts. So everyone who works at the palace is a druid," Beck said. "They all buy into his nonsense, but you can bet your ass they've gotten their ass beat by another race at least once. They'll shit themselves at the sight of a bunch of pissed off wolves looking for a pup."

Harland scratched the massive amount of hair on his face.

"It would offend the bears and big cats they came at my pup too, and they despise the king and queen. So I'll call them too."

"I know you don't trust us, but time is of the essence," Salem said. "We slipped a potion I learned from a sea witch into the king and queen's wine. They won't wake for a long time, but they will eventually wake up. We've been watching him long enough to know that his real power is in lies. Dangerous liars get a million times worse when the facade starts to crumble. We need to pull this off while he's sleeping, then you can do whatever you want with him.

Harland threw back his head and made this noise. The rest of the wolves joined in. I was guessing it was like a sonic pulse when I needed to call for help in the ocean. I could hear all these different noises of things responding.

I thought this was going to be a simple killing with no questions asked. It could have been, but now the only way to keep my druid princes and many innocent people safe were to gather a mob. Mobs tended to go out of control in the ocean, and I had a feeling this could be no different.

We hadn't even started moving through the streets, but based on the cries responding to the wolves, there were plenty of shifters in these woods who were willing to help, even without the whole story.

CHAPTER 30

I'd never met a wolf before, and I got the feeling they weren't treating Taron and me the same as they treated the Sins because they understood why we were here. Maybe we were all a little too trusting or just desperate to murder the king, but we heard them out with little suspicion. Unfortunately, we didn't have as much time to go into the rather long-winded version we all got, so the wolves really didn't trust three men who showed up out of nowhere to murder the monarchy, even if they knew the truth now and their pup was currently kidnapped.

The wolves all shifted and joined us as we raced through the forest. More creatures joined us. Callum pointed out bears and panthers as they joined us. Honestly, they were scarier than the horse was, but I understood they weren't monsters, and the horses ended up not being so bad.

When we got back to the city, people were already out of their beds because we were making noises that could be heard from far away. They noticed the princes on horseback with a whole army of shifters behind them. Most of the people were screaming to find out what was going on. In certain parts of the village, people just joined us without asking.

It was beautiful and so different from where I came from. Mermaid villages and kingdoms were kept far apart for a reason. You didn't visit without an invitation, or you were an ambassador, and even the ambassadors were only supposed to visit on certain days.

If this many creatures from one sea village swam by another village, no one would join them. No one would even ask why they were in their territory and if they needed help like people were doing here. They would see it as an act of war, and they would attack. If my village were to ask for help or even spread the word of the massacre, it would have to be done on the approved days, or people would die.

This was very different, but I liked it. The wolves here seemed territorial, but not like us. They stopped to listen, even if they didn't know what many of us were. It was pretty effective because I think everyone who came out of their house joined us. Some were angry about the pup, but I could hear people muttering about friends and family that had been arrested.

The princes didn't have time for grand speeches, but they managed to get enough out that people were being framed. That was enough for them to join us. It was wholly strange to me that people didn't need the full story to turn on their leader here, but his entire reign was built on lies and violence. Maybe it just needed a little nudge to topple.

Taron and I went along with this because all the land dwellers told us it was the only way the princes and many innocent people wouldn't die, but I was starting to doubt that.

Some people were marching with weapons I recognized. Some of them had grabbed things I was sure weren't meant for fighting but were sharp and could do damage. People had lit sticks with fire,

and they were angry. This had every opportunity to go bad. Everyone was angry, and they wanted someone to pay for it. I'm sure everyone could agree it needed to be the king and queen, but if they got whipped up enough, I had a feeling it would include anyone who got in their way.

As we got closer to the palace, there were fewer houses and businesses for us to disturb. Callum finally addressed me instead of his people.

"I'm sorry, Kishi. Now that the wolves are involved, you can't be there when he dies. Taron can't either. Wolves have their own justice system, and it's too dangerous for you to be in the forest when it's going down."

"Taron and I might be okay with that if we know what they are going to do to him."

"You'll like it. They will strip him of everything but his underclothes. The wolves will give him a ten-minute head start into the forest for fairness, and then they will all hunt him for sport. Wolves have several ways of tracking prey. They can smell it, even if they are attempting to hide. He'll have his magic to defend himself, and he'll probably think it's enough to beat an entire pack of pissed off wolves right up until they catch him and rip his throat out with their teeth."

"I didn't know Taron could just bring his shark teeth back. It was very sexy. I wouldn't mind holding him down while Taron bit him, and Taron would love it, but I understand we are outvoted."

Callum chuckled and squeezed my waist.

"Taron's teeth were terrifying when he whipped them out. You have a strange idea of what you find sexy."

"I think it's sexy that you're doing all this to stop him and save that wolf pup, even if I suspect this crowd is angry enough to eat all of us."

Callum leaned forward and bit my ear. I broke into goosebumps. Callum was much less forward than Beck, and I liked that about him. But, I also really liked this side of him too.

"We're going to spoil you when this is over, little mermaid. If you think Beck's place is nice, you've never seen my home."

"Just the secret passages and a glance at your father's room. It's very purple."

"Purple is associated with royalty. He's very superstitious for a druid. It's just a color, but he thinks people will respect him more if he covers every inch of the palace with it and wears it. Frankly, we're all tired of looking at it, and when I'm king, I'm going to take it all down. There are countless artisans in the kingdom he won't hire because they aren't druids. So after I cleanse the palace of their negative energies and do a banishing spell, I'm going to commission them to redo the entire palace."

"We still have to pull this off, and that mob is pretty angry. How do you plan on controlling them?"

"I'm next in line for the throne, Kishi. Mob control is part of the job training. We're here. If you think Taron's scary teeth are sexy, wait until you see me in action."

We were now in front of the palace, and guards were spilling out to meet us. They hadn't attacked, so that was a good sign. Everyone started getting off their horses. I needed help, and so did Taron. It went a lot more smoothly with me than it did with Taron. Taron nearly knocked Beck over and made the horse mad.

This was it. They woefully outnumbered now us, and I knew if Callum said the wrong thing, they were going to turn on us. Especially, the Sins, Taron, and I because we weren't like them.

They'd gotten me this far. I proudly stood by Callum's side as he faced his people. I had faith he'd find the right thing to say.

CHAPTER 31

Guards were spilling out of the palace and blocking the front door. It was different from what we wore to battle in the sea, but they had armor, shields, and weapons. They hadn't attacked, and I had a feeling that had everything to do with Beck, Callum, and Forrest being there and the sheer number of people they brought with them. I was guessing they didn't have any intention of letting us inside right now.

"I'm speaking to everyone out here, including the palace guards!" Callum yelled. "All of you know someone who has been convicted of a crime and executed, even the guards defending the palace. I want you to think about those people and everything you knew about them. All of you will have the same story. They were good people. They were loved.

"You never saw it coming when they were arrested for horrible things. *Everyone* here will say the same thing, and that's not common for people capable of true evil. There's a feeling, a smell around them, that makes you want to keep your distance. Some people can fake it in public, like the king and queen, but not every single citizen in this kingdom that has been arrested.

"It's been a highly kept secret, but some of you that have seen the queen have guessed she's sick. All the shifters here have probably wondered why you haven't been allowed anywhere near the king and queen. It's because you could smell that she's dying.

"It didn't have to be this way. There were surgical and medical options that would have prolonged her life. There were *known* working treatments for what ails her. It took us a while to figure out what he was doing, and we were trying to gather proof to expose that he was framing people and sacrificing them under the full moon to try to cure her.

"The strangers standing with us are witnesses. My father sent an entire ship of sailors to the deaths to violate the treaty with the mermaids. Before the ship was sunk, they captured a mermaid and several revered sea creatures in the net. They butchered them and tossed them back in the water.

"Some of the Seven Deadly Sins could feel his evilness from far away and came to stop him. They had a plan, but then we realized he's turned away from sacrifices. He's moved on to another form of forbidden magic that has never worked. He's kidnapped a wolf pup in an attempt to steal her magic. It's not going to work. Druids can't steal magic from anyone. I don't need to explain to any of you he's not going to leave her alive when he's done to send her pack after him.

"We could have returned Cassandra to her pack and carried out our previous plan, but it would have involved lies and more innocent people dying. I refuse to take the throne on dishonesty or build from what he built. You need to know what he's done. It's the only way this kingdom can prosper.

"We're going to go in there with Harland and get his pup back. I hope the guards standing there listening will do the right thing and let us pass. I know some of you appreciate the life he's given you

and has bought into some of his speeches about druids being superior. Any species that claims to be superior wouldn't resort to the things he's done, and they wouldn't harm a child."

I'd give it to Callum. The mob was eating out of the palm of his hand, even if they had just heard they had been lied to and sacrificed. They hadn't become violent just yet. Everyone, including the princes, turned to the guards at the front door to see if they would cooperate.

Mermaids were generally violent, and I had no problem killing any of them if they still chose to stand with the king and queen after that speech. But, I would not get to kill the king or queen for what they did to my sister because the wolves outnumbered me. I had accepted that and thought wolf justice had the right idea.

Still, my sister and Taron's family were dead, and I needed to stab someone for that. If anyone still supported him after that and wanted to stop us from rescuing Cassandra, I'd happily kill them. Yeah, the druid king would be dead, but it was a little unfair Taron, and I left everything behind and didn't get to take our anger about the whole thing out on anyone.

I didn't *want* a huge fight to break out and any of these good people to die, but we came here to murder the king, and someone who still supported him after all of this would do.

Many of the guards threw their weapons down and joined us, but several of them didn't. They stayed right where they were but didn't raise their weapons. Finally, an older man with a wise face stepped forward.

"How do we know you're telling the truth? Some of us were guards under the old king. The one your father stole the throne from. He was a good man who didn't fall by the sword but by words. I've seen war, boy. I've seen good men die so someone could get more powerful. This could just be a power play for the throne."

"I didn't put a wolf pup in his chambers, Jorah. She can tell you for herself who kidnapped her and hurt her. You're the captain of the guard, and you earned that position. Tell your men to step aside and come with us. You'll see for yourself."

"If you're wrong, all of us will be punished for disturbing him."

"We aren't, and if you do nothing, a child will die, and you'll be fighting a war with every shifter in this kingdom. Probably everyone else, too, since it involves a child. You taught us how to sword fight, Jorah. You watched us grow up. So you know we aren't liars. We'd never orchestrate this if it weren't true," Forrest said.

"No one dies," Jorah said. "Your people don't attack. I'll lead you and Harland to the king's chambers to check for his pup. I'll make sure no one under me attacks. You need to do the same with your people."

"A request," Beck said. "Kishi and Taron lost their home to come here to stop a war with the mermaids. They both lost someone. They will stay with us in the palace when this is over. They are family now. They should be there when he's arrested."

"Can they behave themselves and not kill him?"

"I understand justice is owed to the wolves," I said.

"And your friend?"

Taron just grinned at him with his shark teeth out. I punched him in the stomach, and he started laughing.

"Taron won't eat them."

Jorah pointed two fingers at his eyes, then at us.

"I'm only letting you come because the princes vouch for you. I won't hesitate to throw you in jail."

I grabbed Taron's hand and squeezed it.

"We promise not to kill anyone."

Tristan stepped forward.

"We'll stay behind and control the crowd. There are some things they need to know. We're good at this. Go."

"They don't know what you are," Forrest pointed out.

"We'll manage. We've done it before," Adamo said. "We usually don't bring an entire kingdom in on our plans, but you're right, Callum. You don't need to start your reign on lies."

Callum slipped his hand into my free one.

"I had hoped to show you my home under better circumstances. Welcome to the palace, Kishi. If you'll have us, we'd love for you to live here with us."

I squeeze his hand and nuzzled his shoulder. Taron and I would love that, but we weren't quite there yet.

CHAPTER 32

We were here with a purpose, but Taron and I were both gaping at this place. I'd seen some ornate homes under the sea, and I'd been invited to the home of mermaid royalty once. They had all been beautiful, but this was something else. We had artists in the ocean, but they didn't have the same materials they had on land.

Homes had different levels in the ocean, but you could just swim to them. They did that here on land too, but we came to this enormous structure it looked like we were meant to climb to get to the next level. I didn't trust it. You didn't float on land like you did in the ocean, and it hurt when you fell. Taron felt the same because we both stopped.

"These are stairs, and they are perfectly safe. You can hold on to me or the banister. It's just one foot in front of the other. You didn't come this far to stop because of a staircase, did you?"

I didn't ask him to, but Taron was Taron. He dropped my hand and scooped me up.

"I will carry you."

"Taron, put me down, or we'll both fall."

"The mermaid is right," Jorah said. "Stairs aren't difficult on your own, but if you're carrying someone, it's a thousand times more difficult. You could both fall and get hurt."

Taron set me right back down again.

"You walk, Kishi. But I would have carried you."

"We figured out legs. We can manage the stairs. Let's go."

Jorah was looking at us strangely.

"I always knew when you settled down, it wouldn't be with a druid like your father would have ordered. The three of you have always been cut from a different cloth. I figured Callum would eventually take the throne when the king decided it was time, and Forrest and Beck would be married off to other kingdoms to seal alliances. I'd miss you two assholes if you left.

"I'm well aware of the fact that Forrest and Beck like to sneak off to break that stupid decree your father made as soon as he took the throne that supernatural races shouldn't mix. Many of the older guards know and haven't said anything because we lost wives and lovers because of it.

"A lot of people have been unhappy with all the laws he's put into place telling people who they are allowed to be in a relationship with and how. The three of you in a public relationship with a mermaid and a shark, and a man and woman at that will make *a lot* of people happy if you allow them to do the same."

All three princes started smirking.

"I thought you were convinced we were lying, and he didn't have a wolf pup in his room," Beck said.

Jorah just grunted.

"Now that I'm not staring at an angry mob and trying to plan how to call for reinforcements while defending the palace, I've had time to think about all the things I dislike about both of them."

By the time Jorah finished telling us he was working for and defending two people he really didn't like, Taron and I had managed to get up those stairs without embarrassing ourselves. They were a little exhausting, and my legs hurt by the top we got to the top.

There were two armed men at the door who didn't leave their post when everyone ran out to defend the front doors. They saw us coming and drew their weapons. I gathered Jorah was their boss, and everyone else stood down when he gave the order. I thought it would be the same here, but he drew his weapon and jumped in front of us.

"The king handpicked these two as his personal bodyguards against my advice. I've never trusted them. He handpicked them from the jails and said they deserved redemption. If *anyone* was going to plant evidence or kidnap a wolf pup, it's these two."

I didn't like those two men even before I heard all that. I just got vibes off both of them that everyone would be better off if I stabbed them. They were outnumbered, but they still stepped forward like they were going to fight us. Finally, one of them turned to the other.

"Get in there and destroy the evidence."

The only evidence in that room that would topple everything was Cassandra. Yeah, everyone had been told he was framing people and kidnapped a wolf pup. Harland and the wolves could tell everyone she was missing, but there was no proof without Cassandra. And what kind of men were willing to kill a child to protect an evil king? Especially one that was about to go down.

We all felt the same about hurting children. Jorah might not entirely believe us Cassandra was in there, but he wouldn't risk it. I liked him.

Harland had changed back into a man as soon as we got to the palace, but he shifted back into his wolf. I could hear snapping as his body rearranged itself. It sounded painful, like when I got my tail back, but he pushed through it quickly.

Harland lunged at the guard, but I really hoped he didn't think we were going to let him have all the fun. I drew my enchanted dagger, and Taron bared his teeth. The druids were sending magic to their weapons, but I had an alternative.

Mermaids had their own magic, and I'd tested it on land in private. The king had a lot of decorations in his palace that could be used against him. There was a large sculpture just outside his door that spouted water into a pool. Mermaids could control the weather and water. I might have lost my home and had legs. I might intend to live on land with my princes, but I'd never forgotten who I was or where I came from.

I flicked my wrist and stole the water from the pool. I sent it to both guards and wrapped it around their faces in a bubble. Let's see them fight for that awful man when they were drowning. Jorah turned and beamed at me.

"That's a handy trick!"

"I get to stab that one!" I yelled.

As soon as my water bubble wrapped around the guard trying to get into the king's chamber to kill Cassandra, Harland tackled him and tore his throat out with his teeth. That just left one evil man, and someone needed to feel my blade for what happened in my home.

Jorah gave me a slight bow and indicated with his sword the kill was mine.

"Normally, I'd say to arrest him and put him on trial, but these two were already supposed to die for their crimes. The king pardoned them and told everyone he saw something redeemable in them.

They just got worse with their second chance, but had a king protecting them this time. Have at it."

Taron jumped behind him as he clawed his face and tried to get my water off. He was much bigger than the drowning man, but he was angry too—his fist connected with the man's side in the gap in his armor. I knew how much Taron hated the taste of land dweller, but I wasn't even mad when he bit a sizeable chunk out of his neck and spit it out.

I poked my water bubble and broke it. He started choking but still looked at me with pure venom. Finally, he actually spat in my face.

"The evidence is probably already gone," he snarled. "He'll overpower all of you as soon as you open that door and have you killed for treason."

I laughed and ran my blade down his cheek.

"I almost want to let you live long enough to watch him go down. Then, you can try to protect his sorry ass when the wolves hunt him for hurting their pup. Almost. My sister and Taron's family are dead because of him. I'd prefer sticking this knife in his gut, but the wolves have claimed his life. So I'll settle for you since you made all this possible."

I drove the knife in his gut and ripped it upwards. Talora told me she cursed the dagger and it would kill anyone with just a cut. She didn't tell me exactly what it would do. We were on a time limit, and I needed him dead, so I gutted him like a fish instead of cutting him and waiting for the curse to take hold.

Talora's magic was extremely effective. The man was dead, and his insides were all over my hand and dress, but his skin was rapidly turning black and cracking. I pulled the blade out of his stomach, and Taron dropped him. Taron kicked the corpse and pulled me into a tight hug.

I knew what he felt because I felt it too. We didn't have to say a word. I didn't feel better. I used the dagger on someone who helped the king do his evil deeds long enough to come to my home and do them there. We were mere seconds away from proving that to his people and making him pay.

It wouldn't bring Seira back. It wouldn't bring Taron's family back. It wouldn't stop me from seeing all that blood and mutilated parts floating in the water when I went to sleep. I thought revenge would do it. We had a plan for that, and it was nearly complete. I thought killing someone would make this feeling go away, but it was still there.

Jorah stepped forward and pulled something from the belt of one of the dead bodies.

"Even if there's no wolf pup in there, it was worth it to kill those two. They had a history of hurting women, then killing them when they were done with them. Men like that don't stop, even if a king vouches for them. I tried to catch them doing it again since I was the one that arrested them the first time, but I could never prove anything. It's time for the moment of truth. I've got the keys to getting inside."

Harland threw back his head and howled. There was a smaller, higher pitched howl from the other side of the door.

"That's my pup. You'd better let me in there, or I'll break down the door to get her."

We all crowded behind Jorah as he stuck the key in the lock. Maybe reuniting Cassandra with her father would make this pain stop. Maybe I needed to save a life instead of taking one.

As soon as the door was open, a bloody girl who appeared to be ten moons old came barreling out the door and into her father's arms. There was way too much blood on her for her to still be alive.

I peered into the room and started laughing. We were all worried about saving Cassandra, but she just needed her wolf back.

As soon as she got it, she killed the king and queen herself.

CHAPTER 33

Taron and I were pretty impressed with Cassandra. She knew exactly who the king and queen were and how powerful they were. No one told her we were there to kill them when we found her or how truly evil he was. She didn't care. They hurt her, and as soon as she could, she wasn't about to wait for someone to save her. She took care of the threat herself, and she was so proud of herself.

Jorah was the only one who seemed offended by all the blood in the bedroom, but he hadn't said a fucking thing about it because he knew deep down, they had it coming, even if he wanted the pretense of a trial.

We were all taken back to Callum's bedroom so he could help Cassandra with her injuries. She was talking up a storm now that her father was there.

"I tried to get them to run so I could hunt them, Papa, but they just laid there! They took my wolf and broke my feet so that I couldn't escape. When the nice people in the wall put the wolfsbane out, I shifted so my feet would heal and slipped out of the chains they had me in. I was going to wait for you, but I just got so mad.

"Two guards came up to me when I was playing in the street when you went to trade with the weaver. They said you were in trouble and I needed to come with them. They threw a hood laced with wolfbane over my head when we got away from the crowd and kidnapped me. I'm so mad they tricked me. Did you catch them? I know I'm not old enough yet, but can I help hunt them when you punish them?"

Harland was trying to clean all the blood off his pup so Callum could see and treat any injuries that didn't heal when she shifted. There was a ton of it. I wasn't quite as young as Cassandra when I made my first kill, but it was pretty messy too.

"We had to kill them to get to you, little alpha, so there won't be a hunt. I'm proud of you. The entire kingdom is out there to rescue you from the evil king and queen, but you just needed us to unlock the door."

I think we were all pretty proud of that pup. I still had no idea what the king and queen looked like. I hadn't seen them through the crack in the wall, and Cassandra had chewed their faces off. But I did know he had a poison tongue and had an entire kingdom believing them even if they might not like him.

I'd sat through trials before that got drawn out for many moons. I wasn't a seer, but I had a feeling I knew how this would play out. The king never did anything himself except for abusing Cassandra. Those two men we killed committed all of his crimes so that when he did sacrifice someone, everyone thought they deserved it because they were a criminal.

Cassandra was a strong pup, but everyone tried to avoid hatchlings giving testimony in the ocean because someone would confuse them into discrediting them. Even if Taron and I were asked what happened, a very good liar could twist it. The king wasn't on that ship, and neither was I. I know what I heard, but someone could make the case that the sounds of the ocean twisted things and that ship wasn't there because of the king.

This was best. I was glad they were dead, and I hoped it hurt, even if they were asleep.

Aside from her hair, Cassandra was mostly blood free now. I didn't know this, but wolves could heal when they shifted. Cassandra didn't have a mark on her, but she told us after breaking her feet, they cut her flesh and tried to drink her blood. I learned a species here survived by drinking blood, but druids weren't one of them.

Jorah would have still been pouting about putting them on trial, but he had limits. Jorah reminded me of a shark, but not like Taron. Taron liked to cut up with me, and that was why we were so close. Most of the other sharks in my home were all about duty and protocol. They took their honor and the fact that they were revered by us seriously.

I had this feeling Jorah was talking about himself when he said people lost their mates when the king outlawed certain relationships. If that had been me and I had been hired to stay close to that king, I wouldn't have left my mate. I would have saved everyone the trouble and stabbed him in his sleep.

Jorah wasn't like that. He took his duty as the king's guard as sacred, even if he could feel something wasn't right. It would have been protocol to put him on trial and let the wolves handle it, but he'd really heard enough. I hadn't been here long, but he knew what would happen if we put them on trial. He just needed a few minutes to come to that conclusion.

"We need a story," Jorah said.

Just then, Salem slipped through one of the secret passages in the wall. Jorah pointed his sword at him, and Harland bared his teeth.

"Put that away," Callum said. "He's on our side."

"The crowd is getting antsy. What happened?"

"I killed the bad king and queen," Cassandra said proudly.

"We do need a story," Forrest said.

"Use me," Harland said. "Tell everyone we fought the guards and killed them to get into his room. They had Cassandra in there and threatened to kill her unless we left. One of the druids hit them with magic, and she got free. I shifted and killed both of them."

"But, Papa, *I* killed them," Cassandra whined.

"I know that, little Alpha. Our pack will know that too. The rest of the people can't know because they were sleeping. They might not think it was self-defense. We're trying to protect you."

That was fucked up. Of course, it was self-defense. Then again, she didn't have a mark on her. Cassandra was pouting because she really wanted the credit. I would have too. Salem snapped to attention.

"Time to earn your trust, Alpha. We need to make the king's chambers look like a fight went down while they were awake. Beck, draw a bath so Cassandra can get the blood out of her hair. Callum and Forrest need to get outside and tell everyone that child is safe, and this is over. The crowd is contained, but Adamo and Tristan can only hold them back so long."

"Take care of my pup, Beck. If you double cross me, I'll eat you," Harland said.

"No eating necessary. Shall we?"

Taron wrapped his arm around my waist and squeezed me.

"It's almost over. Do you feel better?"

"I thought I would, but not really."

"You just need time. I'll help. So will Forrest, Beck, and Callum."

"Are you going to bite them if they come to bed with us? Your teeth are sexy, but not if you are biting them."

"I won't. I don't want to kiss Forrest and Callum, but I know you do. So I'm not mad about it."

"I do love you, Taron."

"I love you too, Kishi."

Forrest took my free hand and squeezed it.

"Ready? It's almost over."

Yes, it was. And I didn't feel much better about the whole thing. Taron was right. I wasn't sorry they were dead, and now they couldn't hurt anyone else, but nothing was going to fix how I was feeling except time.

CHAPTER 34

Going down the stairs was much easier than getting up them, even if we had to rush when we got halfway down because we could hear angry shouting outside. We ran outside, and Tristan and Adamo were barely controlling the crowd. All the guards outside had joined the mob at this point.

The guards calmed when they saw Jorah and everyone else was looking to Forrest and Callum.

"It's over!" Callum yelled. "The wolf pup is safe with her father. The king and queen did terrible things to her, but nothing that couldn't be healed once she had access to her wolf again. With a bit of information from Jorah and the fact that they knew she was in there, we found out his personal bodyguards were the ones who kidnapped her.

"They were wicked men plucked from the gallows under the guise of redemption. They were the kind of men who would plant evidence, kidnap a child, and protect murderers for the right price. They are dead, as are the king and queen."

Everyone started talking at once, but no one got violent. The shifters were howling and roaring. Some people started grabbing someone nearest them and passionately kissing them. Some were biting. I was guessing those were the vampires I'd heard about. People in the crowd were shooting pretty magic in the air.

Everyone seemed happy except the palace guards. They seemed to be the warriors on land, and I could hear mutterings from some of them they never liked those guards we killed. They disliked them enough that they were a bit upset they didn't get to fight them with us. I rather liked that about them. It reminded me of home.

Something was missing.

Forrest threw some sparkling magic in the air.

"It's going to be a new era in this kingdom. Most of you know us. You know we aren't like our father. We didn't agree with some of his rules any more than you did," Forrest yelled, elbowing Callum in the side.

"I haven't been crowned yet, but I'm next in line. My first acts as king will be to revoke all of his laws policing who you can be with. This kingdom hasn't had a *proper* party in a long time. Not one where everyone was invited, and you could bring whomever you wanted. It's time we brought that back. Party at my place in two moons. I expect you all on your worst behavior!" Callum yelled.

I really liked this side of Callum. I hoped he let his hair down a lot now that he wasn't being the responsible one so his brothers could have their freedom. He was going to make a great king, and he knew what his people needed. Sometimes, people needed a firm hand and a fight.

But other times, a big celebration was warranted, and this was that. Even the guards were in a

better mood now, even if we had left them out of the fight. Salem and Harland were upstairs staging a scene in the bedroom, but Callum and Forrest had given everyone what they needed without needing to see what was up there.

"Get some sleep!" Forrest said. "It's late, and it's been a trying night. Harland and his pup are reunited and getting cleaned up inside. They'll return to their pack soon. Come to the party at the palace to celebrate a new, prosperous era in this kingdom."

The crowd started to break up and go home, but the guards all fell to their knees, even Jorah. I wasn't sure what they were doing. I'd tripped and ended up on my knees a few times while I was trying to figure out my legs, and it was wholly unpleasant. I'd gotten on my knees to pleasure Taron, and it hurt without a pillow. I couldn't imagine why they would all do that out here with no cushion if mating weren't involved.

They all raised their weapons and bowed their heads.

"We swear to protect the true king and everyone he loves," Jorah said.

Callum touched Jorah's shoulder.

"I don't want blind loyalty from anyone, not even my guards. I want you to question me if I start getting power hungry and passing laws that don't benefit anyone in this kingdom. That said, I have a proposition for you, Jorah. You've served under two kings. You taught my brothers and me everything we know about fighting. I know your shoulder still bothers you, and you probably know more about being a righteous king than my father ever did. I can't think of anyone I'd want as our advisor more than you."

Jorah flushed purple, but all the guards who answered to him started beating their hands together and telling him he deserved it.

"I suppose I could, but who would manage the guard?"

Forrest laughed and helped him to his feet.

"Stop being modest, Jorah. You've got someone in mind, and you've been preparing them for the day you eventually put your sword away."

"Take some time to think about it, Jorah. We all need to get to bed. It's been a long night."

We went back inside, and Harland had gone back to his pack with his pup. I had chores to do back home in addition to hunting. If me or someone else in my family didn't do something, it wasn't getting done. Beck just had to give the word, and all the dead bodies were gone. There was a team of people cleaning blood out of everything.

I usually would have said that was a sign of being extremely spoiled, but killing people was a lot messier on land than it was in the water, and I certainly didn't want to clean that. Things were also much heavier on land, and I certainly didn't want to dispose of a corpse.

Callum wrapped his arms around my waist.

"Can I steal you for myself tonight?"

I wanted to, but I didn't want to hurt Taron by doing this without him. I knew he was okay with all of us together, but I didn't know if he wanted me doing things like that without him. I knew if I asked, he tell me it was okay, even if it wasn't, and he'd be devastated. So, where would he sleep tonight? I wanted to be with Callum, but even if he was okay with it, I didn't like the idea of Taron being alone in this vast place.

Beck wrapped his arm around Taron and shot us this knowing look.

"Can I steal your shark for the night, Kishi? He's figured out all the fun things you can do with women, but I'd like to show him all the kinky things that can make you happy when it's just two men."

"I don't own Taron. That's up to him. Taron, what do you want to do?"

Taron looked at Beck, and then he looked at me. I knew what he was feeling because I was grappling with the same thing. He wanted to, but he was worried about me. I walked over and pulled him into a hug.

"You won't hurt my feelings if you do. I want you to feel good, and Beck can teach you things. I can go with Callum. Is that okay?"

"Forrest?" he asked.

"My time will come. It's my turn to be the responsible one. There are plenty of servants in this palace who don't understand what happened. We also need to perform the rites for the people who died and do a cleansing, or their spirits will linger here. You don't even want the spirits of good people staying behind. Trust me. We don't need the ghosts of the bad people who died here tonight haunting the place."

We had rites in the ocean, but the dead stayed dead. We did them to help people pass into the afterlife peacefully. I didn't like the idea of Forrest being alone any more than Taron, but I liked the idea of all those wicked people returning even less.

I grabbed Forrest and kissed him.

"Thank you. Soon."

"I will go with Beck," Taron said.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't."

Beck laughed and started tugging Taron out of the room.

"You two are up for literally anything, and I love that about you."

Callum scooped me up like Taron loved to do.

"It's time to show you all the perks of being with royalty, Kishi. We're going to spoil you and Taron rotten. I don't have to pretend to be the dutiful druid prince, so my father doesn't flip out anymore. There are certain responsibilities engrained in my blood because one day, I'd be running a country, but the things I did to soothe his paranoia were never me. It feels like this enormous weight has been lifted off my chest. I'm about to be responsible for the lives and wellbeing of everyone in this kingdom, but that seems easier than being his son."

I nuzzled his neck as he kicked his bedroom door shut behind him.

"I'm still getting used to everything on land, but if you need people to help you skirt the rules, Taron and I are perfect for that."

Callum set me on my feet and swept me up into a passionate kiss.

"I'm going to be king, Kishi. I plan on undoing all the idiotic rules in place against having fun and who to love. He didn't just make certain relationships a crime. He outlawed several things that did nothing but bring people joy. I'm going to undo all that."

I ran my hand down his chest.

"You and I together are still illegal until you are king."

Callum smirked at me.

"I don't brag about it like my brothers, but I've broken that law several times. I'd love to show you everything a succubus taught me about pleasuring women."

I would have said yes, but he didn't ask. He crushed his lips to mine and started unlacing my dress. I *really* liked this side of Callum.

CHAPTER 35

Callum differed from his brothers in every way, and I learned many different things now that we were alone. Beck was playful. He guided Taron and me in a way that was pleasurable and fun. I had no doubts Taron was enjoying himself.

So was I. Before we got naked and started wrestling in his bed, he gave this grand speech about being free and wanting to break the rules. Callum made it seem like he would rule with a soft hand.

The more he kissed me, the more I could tell what kind of king he would be. He'd be fair and generous, but Callum wasn't afraid of taking what he wanted either. If he wanted me a certain way, he didn't ask like Taron or Beck did. He picked me up and put me how he wanted me.

If I were back in the ocean, I probably would have stabbed him for that without even considering I might have liked it. And I did. I actually loved everything about it. There was something erotic about being tossed around the bed and being attacked with kisses and caresses.

Callum flung me on my back and pinned my arms above my head. I had zero urges to fight him or stab him. My heart was racing with excitement, and I was massively turned on.

"I didn't get to spend as much time with you as your brothers since you were off with your father, but I'm glad you asked for this."

Callum growled and started nibbling on my collarbone.

"That's over. I still have a kingdom to run, but I'm not going to force my brothers to go marry some princess they don't know or love for some alliance. There are other ways to do that without destroying them by making them leave you. We all have different tastes in women, and Beck loves people, not what's between their legs.

"You are unlike anyone we've met before, but you fit with all of us. Forrest and I are glad Taron comes with you, too, even if he had some jealousy issues at first because Beck has always needed a lot of attention. If we're all going to be sharing you, Beck will get his feelings hurt if one of us steals you away. I'm glad Taron cares for him too."

"I was worried about that with Taron too. Sharks don't really do relationships. They fight each other when a fertile female shows up, but they don't really have any interest in them when they aren't. He never even thought about it until he came here with me. I love him, and I'm glad he's here with me like this, but I'm glad he has Beck too."

Callum bit down on my nipple.

"I can be selfish and greedy too, Kishi. But, right now, I'm just glad they are entertaining each other, and I get you to myself."

"I like this too, but I had fun with Beck and Taron together. I want to try it with all four of you. I don't think Taron will eat you and Forrest."

"You say the craziest things, Kishi. I love that about you. I'm guessing you want that to happen without a full moon too."

I lunged forward and bit his chest.

"I want it to happen the night of your party. Mermaids also put a lot of stock in the moon and stars, but we don't let it tell us when we can mate. If mermaids didn't have to beat the shit out of mermen before we could get started and it was all fun like it was here, we'd do it all the time."

Callum guided himself inside me while keeping my hands pinned with his other arm. We both groaned because, damn, it felt good.

"I wouldn't mind if you fought back a little, Kishi."

"Why? I'm exactly where I want to be."

"Holy, shit, you're beautiful like that," Callum growled.

I wrapped my legs around his waist as he totally dominated me. He was much rougher than Taron dared to be. I loved it. I couldn't help it. I *wanted* to be here, and I wanted this. I loved being pinned down and completely controlled, but I wanted more. Maybe there were benefits to a bit of fighting when it came to mating on land.

I wasn't trying really hard like back in the ocean. I didn't need to prove something, and he didn't need to earn anything with me. I just struggled enough to egg him on, and it was so worth it.

He thrust harder and faster. Callum pinned me with his body. He buried his face in my neck and bit me hard enough to hurt. I wasn't mad about it. I was learning I adored a little pain with my pleasure.

Callum shoved his hand between us and started rubbing my clit with his thumb. I lost it. It was too much. My entire body clenched as I came, and I accidentally shot the water in the glass next to the bed all over us. Callum growled and bit me again as he finished.

We laid there for a minute, catching our breath. Callum rolled off me, but he wasn't done yet. He picked me up and draped me over his chest. I wrapped my arms around him and snuggled in.

"If Taron and I are going to be living here, you're going to have to teach us how to navigate your home. This place is massive, and we can't use currents like back home. We'll probably get horrifically lost exploring your kingdom, too, now that we can."

Callum started playing with my hair, and it felt so lovely.

"You're dating royalty, Kishi. You'll probably be queen here. All of our days of sneaking around without bodyguards are over. I'm not wild about that idea, and Forrest and Beck will hate it, but it's a necessity. For you and Taron as well."

"Just not when we go swimming. Taron will eat them. My body hurts in the most delicious ways."

"That's the best kind of hurt. So get some sleep, Kishi. Tomorrow, we are going to show you all the good things about our kingdom."

CHAPTER 36

I loved everything about Beck's place, but I wasn't sure about the palace. It was beautiful and had everything I could possibly want. The men I cared for were here. The servants took some getting used to. I was sure they had them in certain parts of the ocean, but not in my home.

An entire army of people showed up as soon as they could hear us moving around. They brought a feast in for breakfast. We didn't even have to leave his chambers. His room had an entire area to eat in.

Callum was generous and thanked them. So did I because usually, if I wanted to eat something back home, it wasn't happening unless I hunted it and prepared it myself. There were people here who cooked, and another team who served it like neither of us had legs and arms capable of doing that ourselves. I was a little uncomfortable they were doing everything for us, and they seemed uncomfortable we thanked them for it.

Forrest joined us for breakfast, but Taron and Beck were still missing. When I asked, they said that was normal, and Taron would be enjoying himself. Taron and Beck didn't join us until we were done eating, and Taron just looked so happy.

"Did you have a good time?"

"It was amazing, and now I have all these ideas on how to pleasure you."

"I love you, Taron."

"Are you ready to take a tour of our kingdom?" Callum asked.

"Swimming after," Taron said.

I knew exactly what he was feeling. I could smell the ocean from Callum's room. Even though it really hurt, the sea was calling me too. That bathwater wasn't even close to swimming. Taron had taken in everything on land very well and adapted like a pro. I knew he would be happy here, and so would I. Part of that had to do with the private beach and the fact that we hadn't lost everything.

"Definitely. We want to see as much of your home as possible because it's going to be our home. The sea is in our blood, and we'll still want to visit often."

"I get why we can't swim with Taron, but can we see your tail, Kishi?" Forrest asked. "Only Beck got to see you in your natural state, and you didn't belong in a bathtub."

"I'm dying to see that too," Callum said.

"If you're on the beach when we come back, you'll see everything. It's pretty graphic getting legs."

"So were your screams when you got wet," Beck said. "I wish Adamo could tell us how long it takes for it to stop hurting."

"I think it's different for everyone. I think it hurts until you finally get the thought of going home out of your head. The call of the sea is powerful, and family is down there. As are people like you. It's a test. You have to accept land as your new home and make a new family with land dwellers. I've mostly already done that. We did what we came here to do. I'm sure it'll stop hurting, eventually. Where are the Sins, anyway?"

"Harland finally realized the only reason Cassandra is alive was because of the three of them. He came to that conclusion when he was staging a scene in my father's chambers. All the shifters know now. They'll be at my party, but they are throwing one of their own in the forest with the Sins as guests of honor."

"I thought they only did that when the moon was full."

The three princes started laughing.

"This is just a normal party. Someone has hunted a wild pig, probably. They've got it roasting over a spit, and everyone is bringing something delicious to eat. They've all broken out the homemade liquor, and their best musicians have formed a band. We're all invited, even you and Taron. We were going to swing by after we showed you more of the city."

"I liked the wolves. They are fierce warriors. Even their pups don't hesitate. And no one here gets angry when they don't wear these horrible clothes."

"They have them stashed everywhere, Kishi. Materials are expensive, and if they don't take them off before they shift, they get destroyed. They *would* have put clothes on instead of standing outside the palace naked, but a pup was in danger. So they aren't roaming the street naked, and they'll be wearing their finest at my party," Callum said.

"You don't *have* to wear the dresses I bought you. You can have clothes made any way you like. You'll probably start some new fashion trends."

It wasn't just us as we stepped out of the palace. They kept their distance, but a man and woman were following us and watching our surroundings closely. They weren't dressed like the palace guards. They had clothes on like the people on the street, but I could tell they had weapons strapped to various parts of their bodies and hidden from sight. They also carried themselves like they were prepared to fight at any moment.

This city was something else. They had entire stores for the sole purpose of buying whatever you wanted. If there wasn't a building for it, stalls were lining the street with people screaming about their wares. You could purchase anything here.

They led me to the fish stall. They had a wide assortment from the shallows and a few things from the deep that must have been caught with one of those evil nets. Taron and I didn't attack the man at the fish stall. Everything he was selling was things we ate too and weren't crucial to us.

Beck led me to a shop with cloth everywhere. A woman perked up as soon as she saw him.

"Nissa, I need your magic. Kishi will be staying with us at the palace. She's a mermaid, and she's not used to clothes. Corsets are uncomfortable even if you like them. Can you whip her up a wardrobe appropriate for the consort of a king and two princes that breaks all the rules for womenswear and makes her comfortable?"

Nissa stuck her bottom lip out and started sulking.

"I was there when the three of you gathered a crowd to rescue that pup. I heard what Callum said about people being able to marry who they wanted. I was hoping you'd pick a succubus, Beck. She's pretty, and there's no one like her here, but it's a little unfair she gets here and hogs all three princes."

Taron and I both bared our teeth at her, but it was way more effective when Taron did it because of his shark teeth. Nissa jumped back and shrieked.

"What is he?"

"Come on, Nissa. I've played with you and an incubus before. Taron is a part of this. He's from the ocean too. You're terrified of sharks, so you might not want to make him angry. He's territorial around his people. We're his people now. You don't love me anyway, Nissa. I read your star chart night I fed you chocolate covered strawberries. You're meant to be with an Ares, and that's not me. You'd get bored with me, eventually."

Taron and I were both trying really hard to play nice. We both knew Beck was letting her down easy and telling her he wanted to be with us. I was just as territorial as Taron was, and Beck was *mine*. I really didn't want to hear about the things he did with her before he met me. I didn't know what a chocolate covered strawberry was, but I wanted to stab her a little that Beck fed her some.

"I think I met him, but he's rude and constantly starting fights."

"And you need a man who can handle being married to a succubus who will keep you on your feet, Nissa. You're bored if you don't have a challenge."

"I'll take the challenge you just brought me. I've never dressed a mermaid before, and she'll need something for your party if she's going to be on the arm of all three of you. It has to be perfect."

"And comfortable?" I asked.

There were a lot of things I didn't understand here, but there were plenty of things I did. Everyone wore clothes here, and the more important you were, the more ornate your clothing was. That meant a lot more uncomfortable in my eyes. Topaz tormented the evil queen with her dresses. I just wanted to be able to breathe properly and not fall flat on my face.

"You're the only mermaid in this kingdom. I can't dress you like anyone else. It's going to be an entirely new design. It's going to be comfortable and beautiful. *Everyone* is going to want one."

"Will I be able to breathe and be able to walk without tripping?"

"It'll be perfect. Talk to Topaz. I design her entire wardrobe. The king thought only the druids were capable of making clothes fine enough to dress the royal family, and he never even suspected a succubus was clothing his children."

"Thanks, Nissa. I already gave you Kishi's measurements. Taron fits my clothes just fine. Can you make him something too?"

"As long as he keeps those teeth away from me. That was terrifying, and I was in a pub when a vampire was dumb enough to hit on an Alpha's mate right in front of him."

Taron gave Nissa this smile that was nothing but creepy. I knew full well he wouldn't bite her, but he needed to scare her a little. We were both a little mad she tried to assert dominance and take Beck. It wasn't a big, violent show like we were used to, but it was still there.

"No biting," Taron said.

Nissa looked like she didn't trust him. He was doing an excellent job of making her think that too. He had no intention of ripping her apart with his teeth, but he was just standing there looking creepy and letting her think that. Fuck, I loved Taron. Beck knew it too and swatted at his arm.

"Quit messing with her, Taron. Nissa is a good person and the best designer in this entire kingdom. She didn't mean it when she said that. Nissa knows I'm not her soulmate."

"A rude bear shifter with a bad temper and a drinking problem is, but I've been trying to avoid thinking about that."

"Conrad is a teddy bear when you get to know him. So give him a chance, Nissa."

"I did. And I keep going back, even if he keeps me awake with his snoring and drinks all my ale before breakfast."

Nissa was complaining a lot, but she had this tiny smile on her face like she secretly liked all that.

I wasn't furious about what she said to Beck anymore. I just hoped she figured out things with that bear because it sounded like she was fond of him if she would just admit it to herself.

"Thanks, Nissa. These two have been cramped in my house while we figured out how to expose our father. We're going to give them a tour, then take them to the shifter party."

"Conrad is taking me when I close up shop. I guess that's one of his perks. I get invited to shifter parties. He said they have a pig *and* a deer roasting. The bears are bringing barrels of their best honeyed ale, and the cats are bringing all the pies they are so good at—the sweet and the savory. You *need* to feed your ocean friends one of their fish pies if you haven't already."

"I like pie," Taron grunted.

So did I, but neither of us had it with fish before. Callum put his hand on my back and steered us out of the shop. I wanted to see everything his kingdom had to offer, but I was also very excited about the upcoming parties.

I adored parties back home. I couldn't wait to attend one on land. I liked the shifters I'd met so far. It sounded like they partied harder than sea otters. Otters were mostly annoying, but they threw frequent celebrations over the most trivial things, and it always tended to get really wild. Something told me the party in the forest was going to get like that too.

I wound my arm through Callum and Forrest's. We had clothing sorted for the royal party, and I got this feeling Nissa would do what she promised and make it comfortable.

"Show me your kingdom! Then Taron and I want to see if your shifters can party like the otters."

CHAPTER 37

I didn't think it was possible for any creature in this world to throw celebrations like the otters did, but I might have been having more fun at this party in the forest. There was always a friendly siren singing in the ocean at celebrations, but I think I liked the music here better. We communicated by sonic pulses because sound didn't really travel any other way under the water.

It wasn't like that on land, and they had all these devices to enhance the singer. The princes were patient and explained what they were. They told me their sisters were proficient on a good bit of them.

"Topaz doesn't like a lot of people, and she doesn't try to fake it, even if she's supposed to since she's a princess," Forrest said. "She likes you. If you ask, she'll give you lessons."

"I like the thing you beat on," Taron said.

"Topaz does too. She likes hitting things, but our father thought the drums were a man's instrument wouldn't bring anyone in to teach her."

"How are these instruments suited to a man or woman?" I asked. "If someone taught me, I could hit the drum and make music too."

"They aren't. The only reason that man is playing those drums is that the woman who usually plays them got hurt when hunting. She's the best drummer in the entire kingdom. Our father thought women were limited and only good for bearing children and marrying off for alliances. Most everyone else here knows women can not only do the same thing as men, but some of them are also better at things than us."

"Well, that's definitely true," I sniffed. "I'm a much better hunter than most of the mermen back home, and I've lost track of how many wanted to mate with me and got beaten across the ocean."

Forrest brought my hand to his lips and brushed them across my knuckles.

"I haven't gotten my moment, but please tell me you smacked Beck around a little before you fooled around."

"*If* I did, I would have won, and he'd be covered in my marks. But, I don't feel the need to fight so much on land, and the three of you are too pretty to maim."

"I've never been very vain, but I guess now I'm grateful for my looks."

The music changed, and the drums were more prominent. Several people jumped to their feet, including Taron. Something about it made me want to move my feet to it, so I joined them. Taron was stomping his feet and waving his hands in the air.

He looked like he was having a blast, and everyone else was doing the same thing. I threw back my head, laughed, and joined them. I felt Forrest's arms wrap around my waist, and he started moving

with me. Callum and Beck joined us.

"What do you call this?" I yelled over the music.

"Dancing. It's a lot more boring and formal at the palace. It's not free like this. They teach you the steps, and everyone does the same thing. Some of the dances are fun, but not like this."

"Are Taron and I going to be expected to know them at your party?"

Forrest spun me around and crushed his lips on mine.

"Dance how you want, Kishi. We're starting new traditions."

The music changed again, and I felt a tap on my shoulder. Salem was standing there with a tankard of ale in one hand and the leg of something in the other.

"Can I borrow your mermaid for a minute?" he asked.

Forrest let me go, and I followed him away from all the noise and revelry. I had a million questions for him, and I needed to thank him. The only reason we saved Cassandra and pulled this off without dying was that they swooped in with a plan and knowledge about those secret passages.

We sat down on a log, and Salem handed me his ale and meat.

"Dancing makes me hungry and thirsty."

He wasn't wrong. I settled in with my ale and meat.

"The princes think a sea witch took your voice now that they've met me. We both know that's not any type of payment they would want. It can't be used in any type of magic, and you don't use it in the ocean, anyway. You were fibbing, Kishi. Why?"

I sighed and took a large gulp from the tankard.

"It was such a stupid idea. I thought they were like mermen and needed me to be helpless. I thought if I pretended I couldn't speak, I could get them on my side while they taught me. Then, I got to know them and realized how amazing they were. I hated lying to them. I pretended like one of their potions cured me. I really need to tell them the truth."

"I don't think you should. Being able to come on land is a heavily guarded mermaid secret. It's always hidden, even when people defect and choose to come on land. You're not like any of those mermaids. They all lived quiet lives near the sea. You went pretty big because you came here with a vendetta.

"You're probably going to end up the queen of this kingdom. It doesn't matter where on land you go. People are fascinated with mermaids. You're going to receive visitors from other kingdoms who are going to have a lot of questions. You have to be gracious and polite while lying to their faces."

"You know mermaids are never gracious and polite, right?"

"I'm aware. But you don't need them angry and asking questions, so you'll manage. You need everyone on land thinking you and Taron paid a sea witch for legs with your voice. If they know mermaids can survive on land without magic, it'll be bad for your people.

"You know there are bad people on land. Mermaids are beautiful and mysterious to people on land. Some people would try to own them like property. They'd send as many ships as they could afford, hoping to capture one and get away before they ended up at the bottom of the ocean. Sometimes, a little lie saves a lot of people."

"You're a Sin, Salem. Shouldn't you be telling me to be honest about everything?"

"We punish the wicked, but we aren't stupid, Kishi. If Cassandra hadn't been in his room, we would have murdered them both and lied to the entire kingdom. We're all mad the pup got hurt, but it worked out the way it was supposed to. Callum went along with it, but he didn't want to rule based on a lie. However, he did understand it was for the best until another option was presented."

"If people tried to capture mermaids, we'd kill them."

"Oh, I'm well aware. You've seen the things people on land have built and invented. You haven't seen some of the terrible things they've made for killing people. If someone were wealthy and very determined, they'd pay the best minds to build something to arm their ships to fight back. Just lie, Kishi. None of us are going to punish you for it, and it'll save a lot of lives. We lie too."

"I don't really want to be queen. I just want Callum, Beck, Forrest, and Taron."

"The job comes with the men. Plenty of people have done crazy things for a seat on the throne."

"I just wanted to stab the man responsible for the massacre in my home."

"Well, he got his face ripped off by a wolf pup, and you found love with his sons. So I'd say you won."

"I did, didn't I? Adamo even told us how we can go back and visit our family and that the pain eventually stops."

"I know you lost a lot coming here, but you gained some good things too. So cherish what you have because there are plenty of people on land who want it."

"Taron and I almost killed one of Beck's old lovers for trying to steal him back, but Beck said she should be with a bear, and we decided not to."

"You'll want to avoid stabbing and biting people here, or not even Callum can protect you. That said, there's nothing wrong with non lethally punching someone in the face. It'll make you feel better, and sometimes, they have it coming."

"Noted."

"Get back to the party, Kishi. These things tend to get wilder when the sun goes down. I'm planning on eating again and dancing."

"Land food is delicious, and I enjoy dancing."

Salem helped me to my feet.

"Dancing and music are some of the most innocent, joyful things about land. If you have the opportunity to partake in either, you should take it."

"I think I'm going to ask Topaz to teach me to play the violin. It was my favorite."

"All of us have picked up instruments in our long lives. It's a lot of practice and can be frustrating. If you get angry with your instrument, I would suggest not taking it out on Topaz. She won't hesitate to punch you right back, even if you're the queen."

"I know. That's why I like her."

"Get back to the party, Kishi. You'll get to see how the royals throw parties next. Go enjoy this one."

I already was, and I appreciated Salem's advice. He was right. I hated lying, and I told myself I needed to for the end goal when I was doing it to the princes. I felt horrible about it and was trying to find the right way to tell them the truth.

I knew I could probably trust them to keep that secret, but for now, everyone needed to believe mermaids could only come on land by trading with a sea witch.

CHAPTER 38

I was exhausted, drunk, and ate way too much food at that party. I pretty much had the best time I'd had in a very long time. Part of that was the company. Mermen liked to go chasing tail at otter parties, and sometimes, I just wasn't in the mood. Sometimes, I just wanted to have a good time.

I enjoyed dancing with all four of them, and I loved it when they flirted with me. They had their hands all over me when we were dancing, and I didn't want them to stop. I wanted more of it. Parties were a lot more fun when you liked a good bit of the people there.

I was used to my legs, but I wished for my tail because I ate so much, I waddled a little on the walk home. I felt insanely ungraceful for a mermaid, but I fully intended on doing the same thing again at Callum's party.

Forrest took my hand as soon as we got back to the palace.

"Can I steal you? You looked beautiful dancing in front of the fire in the moonlight."

"I feel like a beached whale. Those cats make insanely good pies. I should have stopped, but I went back for more."

"Come back to my chambers. I'll hold you and rub your puppy belly."

"What's a puppy?"

"An adorable creature. We'll get you a puppy if you want one. They are great."

"I don't want to talk about a puppy. I *need* to get this dress off."

"Taron's with me again," Beck said.

Taron grunted and broke out into this huge grin.

"I like this," Taron said.

Beck scooped me up and started running up the stairs. I shrieked and held on for dear life because I still didn't like those stairs very much. He ran all the way down the hall, and all that jostling was making my stomach feel a little funny. He fumbled with the door and didn't set me down until we were alone with the door shut.

He said we could just get naked and snuggle, and that was probably a good idea. He was just so pretty, standing there with his hair mussed and his cheeks flushed. I was *dying* to know what he looked like without his clothes on when he was on top of me.

I walked over and started tugging at his shirt.

"You're the only prince I haven't seen naked yet, Forrest. I ate way too much, and I don't care. I'm finally alone with you, and I want to mate."

Forrest growled and started pulling at my laces.

"I won't even get mad if you want to fight a little."

I started yanking at his belt. I'd already figured out how to remove male clothing, even if I needed help with mine.

"I ate way too much to fight you, and I don't want to."

"Good, because I have an idea I'm pretty sure you haven't done yet. Callum wouldn't have done it, and Beck might not have."

"Ooh. What is it?" I asked, yanking his trousers down.

Forrest pulled me to my feet and kissed me.

"I'll never be able to catch a ride with a shark or dolphin like you have, but it would be extremely sexy to be ridden by a mermaid."

I frowned. We were both naked. I was turned on, and his cock was rock hard. Did he really want to get dressed again to go swimming? Even if he was a strong swimmer, I couldn't ride him in the water like I would Taron. We'd both sink, and I'd end up having to save him. It sounded like a terrible idea. Forrest chuckled.

"Not in the water. In here."

"It sounds complicated."

Forrest swooped me up and carried me to bed.

"Tonight, I'm going to teach you how a mermaid rides a land dweller. It'll feel good for both of us."

I growled.

"You said you never met a mermaid before. So how did you get one to ride you?"

Forrest chuckled and set me on the bed. Then, he started placing gentle kisses along my neck.

"I haven't met one before. On land, some men find it extremely sexy when a woman takes control. Women like it too. It's a different kind of ride."

"I'm intrigued. Tell me more."

Forrest grabbed me and flipped over, so I was on top of him. This was new, but I wasn't entirely angry with this idea.

"You're running this show, Kishi. There are *many* different positions to make love on land. Some men insist on being in control of everything, but a woman is also capable of doing it too. Some men find nothing sexier than that, and I'm one of them."

Forrest *said* I was the one in control, but he still had other fantasies he wanted to bring to life. He grabbed my waist and hauled me up so that I was straddling his face. I gripped the headboard and tried to lift myself up.

"Forrest? Can you breathe like—oh!"

Forrest wrapped his arms around my thighs and pulled me closer. I didn't know what he was doing or why I was sitting on his face until I felt his tongue. This felt amazing, and it was exciting. We didn't do this in the ocean, but it reminded me of home.

If a merman bested me and earned the right to mate, I was still mostly in control and had every right to kill him if he did something wrong and hurt me. This position was dangerous and exciting. It felt amazing. I had no desire to hurt Forrest, but I could. I could snap his neck in an instant. I wouldn't, but the fact that I could was exhilarating.

I like it when Callum took total control of my body, and I liked it when Beck was giving orders. I adore this too. I flung back my head and ground myself into his tongue. He wouldn't have sat me on his face if he couldn't handle it. And he did. If I moved myself harder and faster, he did the same with his tongue.

I gripped the headboard as I writhed on Forrest's face. My long hair was tickling my back and

thighs. I threw back my head and shrieked when my orgasm hit me. Forrest licked every inch of it out of me. I needed a minute, but I wasn't selfish. Forrest was probably having issues breathing. I climbed off his face and snuggled into his chest.

"How was that?" he asked.

"You must be insane asking a mermaid to sit on your face. I could have snapped your neck with my legs. In the ocean, it's perfectly acceptable to kill a merman during mating if he goes too far. Not even their family gets mad about it."

"Your home seems like it can be a violent place. But, it doesn't have to be like that here. I wasn't worried, Kishi. You were in total control. There was nothing I could do to threaten you unless I used magic. I'd never do that."

"I like we don't have to fight. And if that's how mermaids ride land dwellers, I liked that too."

Forrest picked me up again and set me down so that I was straddling his waist.

"That's just one way. Ready to try the next?"

"I'm interested."

"Then, hop on my cock and take what you want. The mechanics are the same, but I'm at your mercy."

I hadn't even considered that possibility, but I was quite excited about it. I grasped his cock and guided him inside me. I groaned as I slid down until my hips met his. Forrest wanted me to ride him, but he didn't intend to lie there like a dead fish. I don't think I would have liked that at all.

Forrest sat up and cupped my ass with his hands. He gave me a little bounce and buried his face in my neck. I growled when he bit my ear pretty hard.

"You're fierce, Kishi. You have this wildness about you—even more than a shifter. I love the random things that come out of your mouth. I want the wildness."

That was so sexy. I'd give him exactly what he wanted. I started moving my hips, and it just felt amazing like this. Forrest nibbled and bit my collarbone as I rode him. I was totally in favor of this kind of ride.

It was almost like a bit of a fight. Forrest would try to bounce me harder and faster. I knew what he wanted, but I was running this show. I snarled and gave him what he wanted, but I wasn't about to just let him bounce me on his cock when this was my ride.

I got a little wild. We both did. Forrest let go when I did. I bit my lip so hard, I tasted blood when I came. He wrapped his arms around my waist as my back arched in pleasure. I collapsed over his shoulder and tried to catch my breath.

"I adored everything about that."

Forrest laid on his back and tugged me down so that I was splayed across his chest. He was still inside me. I could definitely sleep like this.

"Get some rest, Kishi. Tomorrow, we show you how the royals party. Topaz has been planning everything. It's probably going to get crazy."

I sighed and nestled into his chest. Land crazy was kind of fun.

CHAPTER 39

My family and I had thrown several parties for hatch days and anniversaries. They were generally small with just family and people we liked who were invited. The party itself was always fun, but all the preparations to make sure people were fed and had a good time were always stressful.

This was entirely different. Don't ask me how word spread this fast, but people from far away showed up in these big things being dragged by horses. Topaz was greeting them and showing them to rooms in this massive place. Callum kept having to disappear to play king, but I understood that was his job.

I thought this was just going to be a celebration. Maybe it was intended to be at first, but it wasn't anymore. Everyone wanted to move on. They were excited to have Callum on the throne just based on a few promises he'd made to an angry mob to get rid of a few stupid rules.

This wasn't a party anymore. Well, it was, but it was a coronation too. I got it, and I was excited. I wanted him on the throne too. It meant this was finally over. Taron and I did what we came here to do, but we made things *better,* not worse. That made it all worth it.

Nissa showed up with clothes for Taron and me. I was glad we didn't kill her in her shop because if I *had* to wear clothes on land, I wanted her to make them now. This dress was amazing.

I knew most mermaids who came to land lived on the outskirts and kept it a secret, but I couldn't have that option unless I left the men I cared for. Salem gave me another option so that I could have everything and keep my people safe with a little fib.

Nissa designed my dress to advertise what I was. I knew there were people here who wouldn't know and would ask me. You'd have to be pretty daft to look at me in this dress and not know. She designed it so that it looked like I had a shimmering tail. It wasn't purple and blue like mine, but it was still lovely. It was shades of red and gold.

There were slits on the side that exposed my legs. I wasn't worried about the exposed flesh. I was excited I was less likely to trip, and I felt pretty. And I could breathe in it! The top of it fit me like a second skin, but no one had to tie me into it until my breath was taken away.

I couldn't stop looking in the mirror. I finally tore my eyes away and looked at everyone else. They looked so pretty. Taron was wearing silver and blue. It really set off his dark skin. Callum said he intended on removing all the purple from the palace. I was reasonably certain he'd picked his new color scheme because we were all dressed in it except Taron.

The princes were all dressed in shades of red and gold like my dress. Taron was dressed differently, but it just felt right. He didn't look upset about it at all. Taron was preening in the mirror just as much as I was. His colors were close to a shark. There was no one here like Taron, and he

didn't need to be dressed like everyone else. Taron was one of a kind, and that was what I loved about him.

Topaz came bustling in with a swish of skirts. Her dress was beautiful, but it looked complicated. I liked her in it, but I certainly didn't want to wear it. Her waist was tinier than usual because of the corset, and her breasts were spilling out the top. I would definitely fall on my face with that skirt, but Topaz owned it, and she looked beautiful.

"You need to get out there and be announced. The stuffy rich druid nobles our father propped up are getting nervous hanging out with the common folk. Everyone is hanging out on different sides of the ballroom, and everyone is too afraid to eat or dance. I *did not* make sure this was catered by the best this kingdom had to offer and hire the best musicians for people not to enjoy both. Beck, fix it."

Beck wound his arm through Topaz's. From what I had gathered, the druid nobles thought they were better than everyone else at this party and made everyone uncomfortable. If *anyone* could bring them together to enjoy a celebration, it was Beck, and I liked him way better than a sea otter.

"Lead the way. We'll handle it. Take my arm, Taron."

I knew Taron cared about Beck and liked being alone with him. Taron enjoyed himself, but he kept telling me how much he wanted to bring what he had learned to bed with me. Taron didn't go to Beck this time. His eyes went straight to me. This was new for both of us, and he wanted to do this together. We always did everything together before.

We both stood our ground. Taron and I had been separated before, and we had fun. We'd probably do it again, but we needed to be together. We were both excited about attending this party, but we were going to go together so we could have each other's back. I understood these people were supposed to be friends, but Taron and I were both prepared to kill any of them if we needed to.

"We go together," I said, grabbing Taron's hand.

"It's just to walk down," Callum said. "You'll need to be presented with me for now, Kishi. Some of the people down there will never accept you if you aren't presented on my arm first. I don't like it, and we never want to separate the two of you, but some of those people think like my father. I need more time to change things. Taron needs to go down there with Beck and Topaz, and you need to go with me."

Taron squeezed my hand.

"It's okay, Kishi."

I understood most of what Callum said, but the only reason I let go of Taron's hand and agreed to it was that he was okay with it. We never went into the unknown unless we were together. I guess I was okay with following behind him. We could still protect each other. He had his teeth, and I still had my magic.

I let go of his hand and took Callum's arm. We walked out and stood at the top of the stairs. There was *a lot* of fuss at royal parties. I'd only been to one in the ocean, but they took it much further on land.

We had to line up at the top of the stairs, and someone at the top called our names down to the people standing at the bottom. I only had one name, and so did Taron. Unfortunately, the royal family had many, and they all had to be called out.

In the sea, names had power. They were whispered to your parents by the depths when you were hatched. Shark's names were equally mythological. I didn't know how they named their hatchlings here or why they needed so many names. I also didn't understand why they were introducing everyone instead of just Taron and me.

They didn't know Taron and me, but I was pretty damned sure they knew the princes and

princesses of their own kingdom, even if they hadn't met them in person before. Taron walked down the stairs with Topaz, Forrest, and Beck after their names were called. Callum and I were standing back.

"Do these people not know your names? Why do you have so many of them?"

I'd called out the name of Taron and all three princes in pleasure when we were mating. Did I have to scream out all four of their names now that I knew them? That just seemed complicated. Callum chuckled.

"They all know us, and we've talked to most of these people in person. I suppose it is odd that they have to announce us at balls and galas when everyone knows us. It's just how it's always been done. They will do it every time we throw a party. Everyone has at least two names here. You have your first name and your family name. Names have power, and sometimes, parents will give their children many. You can just call us by our first names."

"Thank Triton, because getting all that out while we're mating would ruin the mood."

"I love the random things you say, Kishi. Ready?"

I hadn't realized they had announced us while we were talking. I was nervous. I squeezed Callum's arm and started walking down the immense staircase. Everyone was staring at me. I'd never had this much attention in the ocean before. They weren't even trying to whisper, so I could pick up snippets of conversations on the way down.

Some of them were talking about how pretty they found me. A few of them had no idea what I was, even with this dress. I really wanted to stab a few terrible people who said I was beneath Callum and he should be with a druid woman. Callum knew what I was thinking and let go of my arm to wrap his around my waist. He pulled me close and kissed my temple. He let them know he heard and disagreed.

Maybe I didn't need to gut those people. I understood that wasn't really accepted here on land. Things were much more direct in the ocean, but I could play mind games too, like Topaz did with her dresses. Some of these people didn't think I was worthy of Callum because I wasn't like him. Callum didn't think that, and neither did his brothers.

Why would I stab them once when I knew it would bother them to look at us when we were happy? Topaz had the right idea with her dresses. I didn't need to kill them when I could draw out their misery by just being happy and in love.

Callum and I were separated as soon as we reached the bottom of the stairs. He was pulled away by a stuffy man and his pinched faced daughter. Harland was tugging at my arm. I wasn't angry about it and let him pull me away.

"Is Cassandra here?" I asked.

"She's back home. Pups are welcome at our parties, but there are breakable things here and people who get mad about that sort of thing. Callum and his brothers don't care about possessions, but a lot of people here who don't own them do."

"That's stupid."

"So is a party where no one is celebrating. Callum's father threw these things all the time, but only rich druids were invited. I'm certain he was framing people long before that nasty woman got sick. The nobles in this land used to be varied, but lands and titles were seized and given to druids when people started getting arrested."

"I'm sorry, but what exactly is a noble? We don't have them in the ocean."

"It's some rich asshole with an over inflated sense of self importance because one of their ancestors did something that caught the attention of a king centuries ago and was given lands and a

title. It's passed down to their children. Those idiots looking down their noses at you and refusing to mingle with us haven't done a single thing good with what they were given. I hope Callum does the right thing and restores what was taken."

"Well, I promised not to kill anyone, but Topaz might if this party gets ruined. An otter would know what to do right now."

"Please. You came to my party. Wolves can liven this up too. Do you trust me?"

"Yeah. We have secrets now. That bonds people."

Harland brought his fingers to his lips and made this terrible noise. He took my elbow and led me to the divide in the room. His pack sprung into action. The princes were still occupied, but Taron joined us too.

Someone leaned over and whispered to the musicians. The tune they were playing changed to a much livelier one. Harland yanked me to his chest while a female wolf commandeered Taron.

"We might not have been invited for a really long time, but we all know how to dance at one of these things."

"Well, I don't. We don't dance in the ocean, not even at otter parties. This is not like at your party."

"Just follow my lead. No one tells you how to dance at our parties, but here, there are set steps. The man usually leads. I got you."

My eyes shot over to Taron. He was standing ramrod straight as the wolf placed his hands on her waist. Taron was very tactile both as a shark and now that he had a body, but he only ever really did that with people he cared for. He hadn't brought his teeth out and taken a sizeable chunk out of her neck yet, so that was a good sign.

"What about Taron?"

"That's Ginger, one of my strongest wolves. She has opinions about everything, and she's not about to let a man control her when it comes to anything. She'll be leading the dance. He just needs to follow."

"I like her already. She'd make a good mermaid."

Harland swooped me up in a dance. I tried to follow and not step on his feet. It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be because he made it easy. Taron seemed to be cooperating with Ginger too. No one was bleeding.

"Ready for some drama?" Harland asked.

"Topaz will stab you if you ruin this party."

"We're just going to bring some druids into the new era."

Now that the wolves hit the dance floor, more people started eating and dancing. The druid nobles looked scandalized and weren't joining in. I saw Nissa cutting through the crowd. I was getting good at picking up magical signatures once I met someone. Nissa had an army of succubae with her and a good bit of good-looking men.

"What's Nissa doing?"

"Those people over there like to think they are superior, but a little touch from an incubus or succubus will loosen them right up. Watch."

"I used to think everyone on land was evil and would want to try to own a mermaid, but if the mermen found out you have people here who can touch you and make you want to mate and they aren't going to kick your ass and make you earn it like we do in the ocean."

Harland chuckled.

"Wolves do that too sometimes if you're mating in wolf form. Many a wolf has tried to earn that

with Ginger over there, but she's never lost."

"I like her already, but she'd better not have any ideas about Taron."

"Trust me, she doesn't. She's still waiting for the moon to bring her the mate chosen for her. *Plenty* of men and women have presented themselves to try. She already has Taron's scent and knows he's not. She's trying to help right now by dancing with someone who is not like her."

I heard giggling across the room. An incubus or succubus had touched all the stuffy people across the room, and the change was pretty drastic. They were all rushing to the floor to dance, and some got pulled over to enjoy the food.

"I'm pretty fond of my powers, but that's a handy trick."

"None of us would be angry if you drowned some of them with the wine like I saw you do in the hallway that night."

"They technically haven't wronged me, and the princes would get so mad. Topaz would definitely stab me."

"Some of those people, no one would get mad except the other nobles."

"They seem to be behaving now. I feel a little sorry for them they need a shot of lust to have fun. Let them enjoy themselves for once."

I felt a tap on my shoulder. Callum was behind me.

"Thanks for saving the party, Harland. Can I steal my mermaid?"

"She's all yours. I'm going to hit up the food. Your sister went all out for this."

"She rescued us from some needy lords and is entertaining them. She probably has all these plots running through her head about poisoning them, but she's being a princess and faking it."

I gave Callum my hand and let him sweep me across the dance floor.

"Can't you send a succubus over so Topaz can enjoy the party too?"

"She's on a secret mission that only works because she's a gorgeous woman, and men are stupid. She's flirting and letting them think they can improve their station by marrying a princess. Topaz doesn't need to be a succubus and use her touch. She can do it without it.

"They are spilling their secrets. They are telling her all the terrible things they did that impressed our father into giving them lands and titles. All his children had to pretend to agree with his ideas and methods for our safety, but Topaz played that game better than all of us. They think she's just like him. They are telling her exactly what I need to take some ill-gotten gains away and restore them to the people they were taken from."

"You play all kinds of games here that we don't in the ocean. Someone would have just stabbed them with a spear back home if they were bad people."

Callum threw back his head and laughed.

"We'll teach you how to deal with palace games, Kishi. You don't *have* to stab someone to make it hurt. There are countless ways to bring someone down."

"Stabbing can be fun and effective too."

"You know what's *really* effective? Being next in line for the throne and people being excited about it. The king's chambers have already been redecorated entirely, and there's now a bed in there big enough for all of us. A little bird told me about an ambitious mermaid who had her heart set on her first land orgy. So we're going to make that happen tonight."

I grabbed Callum and pulled him down for a kiss. Several people in the room started making noises with their hands and howling. The people Topaz was manipulating looking over and scowled, but I didn't care. Pretty soon, they'd have much more to worry about than me kissing Callum in front of them.

“Do royal parties last as long as shifter parties? Because I’d like to drag you all there now.”

“Me too, but they are crowning me tonight. This party won’t go on nearly as long. As you’ve noticed, this place is massive. It takes an entire staff to keep it running. It’s just respectful to keep the mess minimal and not keep things going all night so they can get as much sleep as possible.”

“I like that.”

Callum yanked me to his chest, and the shifters started howling again.

“You’re going to like what happens after this party even better.”

“How long until they put that crown on your head?” I growled.

“When Topaz gives the word. She’s still extorting the nobility.”

“Then let’s dance. I can be patient for the greater good.”

CHAPTER 40

Those nobles must have had a lot of dirty secrets because Topaz didn't leave them and signal it was time to crown Callum until my feet hurt from dancing and I had overeaten again. The food was different from the shifter party, but they had so many options here on land. It wasn't just that they had fire here, and we didn't in the ocean. They did different things with it to their food.

The coronation was lovely, even if I had no idea what was going on. Taron and I stood next to Callum on his big throne with smiles on our faces like we did. It seemed like *a lot* to make him a king when everyone wanted it. Beck and Forrest gave pretty speeches before a druid who looked like he was wearing a weird dress came forward.

The druid in the dress didn't just put the crown on Callum's head. He rubbed some sort of oil on his forehead that I could smell from where I was standing and starting chanting words I didn't remotely understand. As soon as he was done and placed the crown on Callum's head, I felt this pulse of magic.

It was different from my magic or sea witch magic. It felt a little different than the magic the princes had used on me. But, something was soothing about it. It gave me hope for the future. I understood my life now was going to include warriors with weapons following me wherever I went, but I just had this feelings no one would try to come at Callum.

It got pretty noisy after everyone felt that magic, but the party wrapped up soon after that. Someone needed to throw Topaz her own party because she jumped in and made sure anyone who wanted to stop Callum and demand favors not thirty minutes after he became king didn't get a chance to.

The last time I was outside this massive, gilded door, we'd just killed two men. When I looked inside, everything was garishly purple and covered in blood. I hadn't been back since then, but it was totally different now.

Everything was red and gold now, and there wasn't a speck of blood anywhere. There was beautiful art everywhere, but I wasn't looking at that. My gaze was solely on that massive bed with the ornate headboard and all the possibilities I could get up to tonight.

"I want to get in that thing so you can show me what this orgy business is about," I announced, pointing to the bed.

Taron scooped me up and raced towards the bed. The druids were hot on their heels. This was pretty much amazing. We were a tangle of bodies on the bed. I lost track of who I was kissing and who was touching me. There were hands and mouths all over me. Beck was sucking on my toes, and oddly enough, I liked it.

Nissa made me a beautiful dress that was a lot less complicated to get out of. It was pulled off over my head, and Forrest briefly got out of bed to put it away so it wouldn't get ruined.

We were all naked, and the shifters definitely had the right idea with this, though I was sure why they didn't get up to this every night instead of just on the full moon. Forrest let out a little growl and yanked me to him.

"Mine. I want her right now."

"I want to watch."

"Me too," I said. "I want to watch Taron and Beck while I'm with Forrest. I want to see what they get up to when they are alone."

"Wish granted," Beck said, tackling Taron. "I have an idea for later. She wanted an orgy, Forrest. You should share with Callum."

Callum's eyes were glittering dangerously as he pulled some supplies out from under the bed.

"I'm interested."

"Do you trust us?" Callum asked.

"Of course."

"Good. Then get on all fours and pay a little attention to Forrest's cock."

I happily did what he asked, but stopped and bared my teeth at Callum when he seemed interested in doing things to my ass. I didn't have my knife, and I didn't *think* I would stab him for that since this might be a land thing, but he'd already be dead if we were in the ocean. Things didn't go in that hole.

Callum sat back on his heels and removed his hands.

"I won't if you tell me not to, but if you'll let me, you can be with Forrest and me at the same time, and it'll feel amazing."

"That's messed up, Callum."

"It feels nice," Taron said.

"It really does," Beck said. "Callum and Forrest just know what it's like to give, but Taron and I both can tell you it feels amazing to receive. We have plans for you, but there are so many possibilities with that option available."

"Does it really feel good, or are they all insane?"

I needed to hear it from Taron. I trusted the princes, but this would have been new to Taron too. He decided it was a good idea to try that and liked it enough to try to convince me to do it too.

"I thought the request was strange but kept an open mind about it. I was surprised I liked it so much."

That was all I needed to hear.

"Okay. I agree, and I promise not to stab you if I don't enjoy it."

"Um, thanks?" Callum said. "What do I get when you enjoy it?"

"I'll let you do it again."

Callum chuckled.

"Fair enough. Just don't stab me until you've had the full experience. Give Forrest a little attention while I get to work."

I took Forrest in my mouth, but my eyes were on Taron and Beck. They were rolling on the bed furiously kissing. It was almost like they were fighting. It was sexy as fuck and reminded me of home. It was different, though. Beck and Taron weren't trying to hurt each other and seemed to be enjoying themselves. And I was certainly enjoying the show.

I got mad about it about it before, but with Forrest in my mouth and watching Taron and Beck, I was really enjoying what Callum was doing behind me. There were definite perks to keeping an open

mind on land instead of just stabbing people.

I moaned when Callum started to thrust his fingers in my ass, and Beck pinned Taron on his back and swallowed his cock. Taron growled and wrapped his hand around the back of Beck's head to force him further down his cock. That was just so sexy.

Beck and Taron were still going at it, but Callum removed his fingers and tapped me on the leg like he was finished.

"Now we're ready to proceed."

"I thought we were?" I asked.

I was so confused. There were so much more options for mating on land than there were in the ocean.

"Are you ready for both of us, little mermaid?" Forrest asked. "You know what I want. Do what you did the other night."

He didn't need to tell me twice. I grasped his cock and slid down it. I felt Callum behind me pressing me against Forrest's chest. I didn't fight him. I just accepted him that this was a part of the grand design. I pressed my lips to Forrest's and stole a kiss. He pulled away and smiled at me. He turned my cheek to look at Taron and Beck. Taron appeared to be doing the same thing to Beck that Callum had done to me, and he loved every minute.

"Watch the show."

I was utterly entranced. I felt Callum pressing into my ass. I moaned because it felt amazing. He took it slow, and I felt pressure, then pleasure. Pretty soon, I had both of them, and I was utterly stuffed with cock. I dug my nails into Forrest's arms because I couldn't deal with it.

"How are you, Kishi?"

"Pretty damned great. Fuck me."

They both started thrusting into me. I alternated between watching Forrest and watching Taron and Beck. I'd never been more turned on in my entire life. The shifters had the right idea with this. We didn't do this in the ocean. If there were people on land who weren't doing this, I seriously couldn't understand why.

Forrest was gripping my waist and thrusting up into me. Callum was behind me, pounding away. I was bracing myself as this massive bed shook. Beck's moans were mingling with my cries, and Callum and Forrest weren't trying to stay silent either. I enjoyed this kind of music too.

My orgasm hit me so hard, my favorite constellation lit up behind my eyes, and I let out this massive wail. Callum let out this huge roar when he finished. Forrest grabbed me and yanked me to his chest as we both shuddered.

I was wrecked. I was sweating, and my entire body was shaking. I wrapped myself around Forrest and snuggled in. I heard Beck laugh.

"I hope you aren't quitting the orgy after one threesome, Kishi. Are you going to leave Taron and me hanging?"

"I'm *not* a quitter. I just need a minute."

Beck and Taron joined our snuggle pile. Callum started stroking my back, and Forrest was playing with my hair.

"Take several because Taron and I had two nights to plan this."

I drew in a deep breath. I knew Taron like the back of my hand and knew enough about Beck to know it would totally wreck me in the morning.

I couldn't wait.

CHAPTER 41

I was still feeling aftershocks and a bit like a jellyfish, but I felt like I was capable of taking on whatever Beck and Taron cooked up when they were alone. Taron had talked me into some crazy shit in the ocean, and I was pretty sure Beck had some wild ideas too. Still, I was up for it.

"What were you two plotting while you were alone?"

"I can only guess," Callum said, climbing out of bed.

"I know," Forrest said, following him.

Beck and Taron rolled over, so they were on either side of me. Taron captured my lips, and Beck started nibbling on my nipples. I gasped and pulled them both closer. And just like that, I was ready for whatever they had planned. I wanted them both, but I had a feeling it would be different from what I just experienced.

I didn't ask. I just went with it. I kissed and touched both of them until I was about to explode with need. I pulled away from them and tried to catch my breath.

"Whatever you were planning, you'd better do it now, or I might die."

"Yes, now," Taron said.

"As you wish. It's just like we planned and what we did the past two nights, Taron."

I still had no idea what was going on, but I let Beck drag me to the foot of the bed. I happily wrapped my legs around his waist when he rolled on top of me. I groaned as he guided himself into me, but I didn't know why Taron was just standing at the foot of the bed stroking his cock. I didn't ask what they were doing. I typically didn't like surprises, but something told me this one was worth it.

Beck pressed his lips to mine, then looked over his shoulder at Taron.

"Get over here and fuck us."

Taron put a foot on the bed and started guiding his cock into Beck's ass. I wasn't expecting this, but I was so into it. Beck's cock pressed into me deeper with Taron's additional weight, but I didn't feel crushed.

"Okay?" Taron asked.

"Totally peachy," Beck groaned.

"Perfect," I sighed.

This just felt right. Taron and I were both predators in the water. That hadn't really changed now that we had legs. We were just resisting some of our urges out of survival, and that was totally okay. Every apex predator did what was needed to not die, and as far as that went, this was easy.

It felt like Taron and I was sharing Beck. Beck was making love to me, but every time Taron would thrust into him, he'd slam into me harder. I loved this. I wanted Beck and Taron to plot behind

my back more.

This felt amazing. Taron wasn't even trying to be gentle, and Beck loved every minute of it. I benefitted from that because the better Beck felt, the more he took it out on me. I was learning there were many different ways to mate on land, but I didn't think I'd ever be a slow and gentle kind of girl.

I liked it rough and hard. I wanted it right at the edge of being a little painful. Taron and all three druid princes were perfect at giving me that. Beck growled at me when I snapped my head up and bit him on the shoulder. I couldn't help it. This just felt too good, and his shoulder was right here.

Taron and Beck were both growling but in a good way. I joined them because it felt good, and I wasn't above that. I forgot we had an audience for a minute until I heard commentary from them.

"I love that she's not a delicate flower and *wants* it like that," Forrest said.

"I love that if she didn't, she'd stab all of us and swim away."

"No stabbing," Taron grunted.

I had totally stabbed a merman before for exactly that, but I'd never met one I liked as much as these four men. They'd been damned near perfect so far, but I was sure they'd eventually do something I didn't like. I planned on just telling them instead of hurting them.

I had no desire to hurt them. I also didn't want to think about it because I was having the time of my life. I was about to orgasm. I bit Beck again when it hit me. That sent him over the edge, and he bit me back. I wasn't even mad about it. Taron threw back his head and bellowed as he had his release.

We all collapsed on the bed in a heap of bodies. Callum and Forrest joined us. Taron nuzzled my neck, and I pulled him in for a kiss.

"How was your first orgy, little mermaid?" Forrest asked.

"It was definitely amazing, and I want to do it again. Just not tonight, or I might die."

Beck chuckled and pulled me to his chest.

"We all need a recovery period, but we all want to do that again too."

"Rest, Kishi," Callum said. "It's all over. All we have to worry with now is forever."

Yes, we did. It was finally over. Taron and I did what we came here to do. We found a family here. We were happy.

We needed to embrace that. I knew we would.

EPILOGUE

Forever was pretty great. Callum was an excellent king. We had this grand wedding where we all got married, and Nissa made my dress. I felt beautiful, and they all looked so handsome in the clothing she made for them. The people in his kingdom turned out and celebrated us. It was a little strange, but it fit. Cassandra threw flowers as I walked down a long pathway to meet my mates.

Callum didn't make his other siblings marry for alliances, either. Topaz was now one of my closest friends. I adored that girl, and she ended up marrying a panther shifter a few years after I got married.

The kingdom was thriving under Callum's rule. I knew what they expected of me since they explained it. Callum needed an heir. Beck, Forrest, and Taron left me alone with him until I fell pregnant. It was wholly strange and excruciating to give birth.

I wanted to do it in the water just in case, but they talked me out of it because of my tail. We had a beautiful son who looked just like his father. My son was incredible. Even though it hurt like fuck, I wanted a million more babies with the princes and Taron.

Taron and I even got to go back home. Salem and Adamo were right. They accepted us back as ambassadors, and I got to see my family. They weren't as angry at me as I would have thought. If they were, they hid it well.

This was good. Better than good. I had family, friends, and my happily ever after. I just needed to plot to kill the king and queen to get it. I didn't regret it. They deserved to die.

Still, I had everything I didn't know I wanted, and I intended to keep it.